

CORBETT, BOSTON

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# The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln

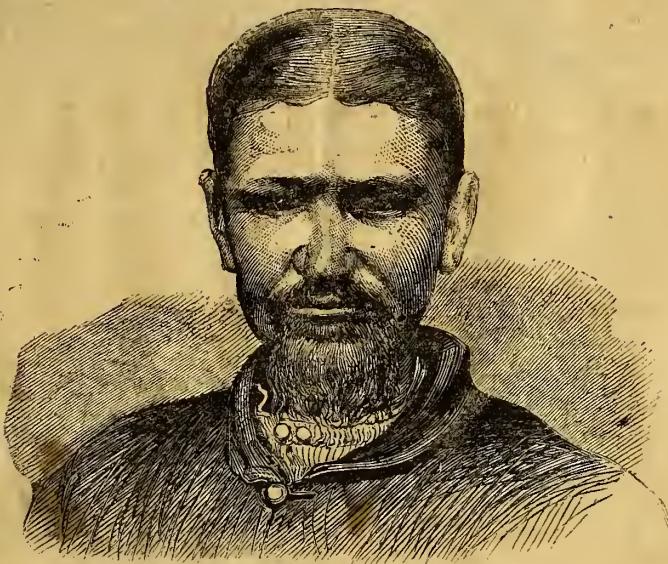
Boston Corbett

Excerpts from newspapers and other  
sources

From the files of the  
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—Sergeant Corbett, who killed Booth, made a profession of religion in this city some years ago, and joined the Methodist Church. His name was originally Thomas H. Corbett, but on this occasion he was baptized "Boston Corbett," and by that name he has been known ever since.

NEW YORK, MAY 13, 1865.



SERGEANT BOSTON CORBETT, THE MAN WHO SHOT BOOTH.—FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY BRADY.

*Ladies*

**SERGEANT BOSTON CORBETT,**  
**The Avenger of Mr. Lincoln.**

SERGEANT CORBETT, the soldier who shot Booth, the assassin, belongs to Co. L, 16th New York cavalry. He was born in London, England, in 1832, and came to this country when seven years of age. He has lived in Troy, N. Y., where he learned his trade as hat finisher, and subsequently worked in Albany, Boston, Richmond and New York, and enlisted in the latter city in the 12th New York State Militia, Col. Butterfield. While serving under Col. Butterfield he called the Colonel to order for swearing. The present is his fourth enlistment. Corbett is a regular Cromwellian and a devout Christian. About seven years ago he became converted, and joined the Methodist Episcopal Church in Boston. Never having been baptised, he says he was at a loss what name to adopt, and he therefore made it a subject of prayer, when he believed himself instructed to take the name of Boston, the place of his conversion. He was accordingly baptised, upon joining the church, Boston; and his name stands upon the muster roll of the company as Boston Corbett. His religious faith would in the present age almost be called fanaticism. On Friday night he visited McKendry chapel and prayed with great earnestness that God would not lay innocent blood to our charge, but bring the guilty to punishment. He feels assured that Booth was delivered into his hands in answer to his prayers. He is a young man of great natural intelligence, and, aside from a modest reserve, converses with much freedom and interest.

In his statement describing the scene of the capture, he declares that he did not intend to kill Booth:

As he passed by one of the crevices in the barn I fired at him. I aimed at his body; I did not want to kill him; I took deliberate aim at his shoulder, but my aim was too high. The ball struck him in the head, just below the right ear, and, passing through, came out about an inch above the left ear. I think he stooped to pick up something just as I fired. That may probably account for his receiving the ball in the head. I was not over eight or ten yards distant from him when I

fired. I was afraid that if I did not wound him he would kill some of our men. After he was wounded I went into the barn. Booth was lying in a reclining position on the floor. I asked him:

"Where are you wounded?"

He replied, in a very feeble voice, his eyeballs glaring with a peculiar brilliancy:

"In the head. You have finished me."

He was then carried out of the burning building into the open air, where he died about two hours and a half afterwards. About an hour before he breathed his last he prayed for us to shoot him through the heart and thus end his misery. His sufferings appeared to be intense.

Sergeant Boston Corbett, says the New York Post  
of the 3d, writes to a friend in this city under date of  
May 1: "My life has been threatened in a most  
bloodthirsty manner, but God is well able to keep  
me."

James Smith

Wincsnt

Nov 14 1865

THE FATHER OF BOSTON CORBETT. The Liverpool (England) *Journal* of October 28 says that Bartholomew Corbett, an old man eighty-nine years of age, father of Sergeant Corbett of the United States cavalry, who shot Booth, the assassin of President Lincoln, was admitted into the Marylebone workhouse on the 24th, so ill from erysipelas that it was expected he could not live many hours. The old man has been a **very** eccentric character. For seven years he has allowed no person to enter the room where he lodged. When on the above day the door was broken open he was found crouched in a corner of his room, which was crammed from floor to ceiling with cases of stuffed birds, books and papers, and the officers had to crawl on their hands and knees to reach him.

The Story of the Killing of Booth  
Retold.

Corbett belonged to the Sixteenth New York cavalry, I think, and was a sergeant. After they had tracked Booth over the river and through woods and fields for days, at length he was discovered in a barn. Corbett saw him in there at the moment the hay or straw took fire. The commanding officer commanded Booth to surrender. He was standing, as Corbett saw him through the cracks in the barn, on a pile of hay, leaning on his crutch, pale with loss of sleep and from excess of hatred and revenge, for John Wilkes Booth never knew what fear was. Corbett said he watched Booth like a hawk. He was standing there on his crutch with a carbine in his hand, and had his back toward Boston Corbett. He was the impersonation of the assassin, and even there, when determined to die, did not for a moment forget his part in the tragedy he was acting.

The fire was mounting up all around him, and the pallor on Booth's face in the wild light of the blazing barn grew ghastly pale, and he stood there leaning on his crutch, with carbine in hand. The demand for his surrender was repeated, and answered with the same brazen silence of contempt, scorn and defiance. Just then the soldiers were standing a few paces from each other all around the barn, every man with his pistol in his hand. Suddenly Corbett saw Booth raise his carbine, as if he were going to shoot some one outside, when, quick as lightning, Corbett raised his pistol, fired at the crippled assassin, and the next moment he was lying on the hay from a wound in exactly the same spot where he hit Lincoln. In the next second Booth was dragged out, stretched on the ground away from the burning barn—the next, he was dead. Corbett told me that Booth never spoke after he shot him, and that all this nonsense of his dying words was mere claptrap of sensational writers. The moment the officers saw that Booth was dead they inquired for the rash fellow who had disobeyed orders; for it was their purpose to take him alive and have a grand state trial, and all that, after the manner of the great historic English regicide trials in the time of James II. Boston Corbett had spoiled that sport. All eyes turned to Corbett, for the soldiers on his side of the barn pointed him out as the guilty one, and he was placed under arrest. From that hour he never knew a moment's peace. The pistol with which he killed Booth was stolen from him that night, but the holster was left, and he had it at my house. His share of the prize was likewise stolen from him the day he got it—every cent of it.

From the moment Corbett killed Booth he was a doomed man. One disaster followed another. He was treated with scorn by his officers and neglect by the government, and his share of the reward he lost. It never did him any good. He was stopped on the road by masked men, a pistol put to his breast, and he was required to dismount and surrender his hard earned money the very day he received it. He was stripped of his clothing and every dollar he had. This was on his way to Washington. The officers there, wild with rage at him for depriving them of the pomp and

circumstances of leading Booth in captive, alive, and parading him through a long public trial, of which they should be central figures, felt like persecuting him further, but better counsels prevailed, and he was released and permitted to retire from the service branded and disgraced. From that hour to this army officers speak of Corbett with contempt. He has been driven from post to pillar. He preaches with a pistol in his pocket. After he says his prayers he lies down at night with a loaded revolver under his pillow. He moans pitifully at all hours of the night. It almost seemed to me my house was haunted while he was there. Although he was a good man, a pure and devout Christian of spotless life, I declare I was glad when he was gone, he was so unhappy, so uneasy, so strange. He is no lunatic. He is no fool. He is a good man every way. But wherever he goes he says Nemesis pursues him, and the troubled spirits of revenge will not let him rest. He is in constant fear of assassins.—Private Dalzell in Cincinnati Enquirer, April 2, 1881.

## THE MAN WHO KILLED BOOTH.

He Becomes Insane in the Kansas House  
of Representatives.

Boston Corbett, the man who shot J. Wilkes Booth without orders, went entirely off his mental base in Topeka, Kan., recently,



BOSTON CORBETT.

and made a time of it. He was assistant doorkeeper of the house of representatives. One day he made an arsenal of himself and went on duty, driving everything before him and away from him. He was finally captured, disarmed, adjudged insane

and sent to an asylum. He was always erratic. Religious fanaticism possessed him before he figured in the capture of Booth. For some breach of discipline in the army he was once court martialed and sentenced to be shot. The order was not executed, but he was drummed out of the army. He belonged to Company L of the Sixteenth New York cavalry, and is English by birth, but was brought up in this country and learned the trade of hat finisher. While living in Boston he became a zealous Methodist. Never having been baptized, he was at a loss to know what name to adopt, but after making it a subject of prayer he took the name of Boston, in honor of the place of his conversion. He draws a pension from the government.

Booth's Slayer Is Free Again.  
Special Dispatch to the *Globe-Democrat*.  
TOPEKA, KAN., May 26.—Boston Corbett, the  
slayer of J. Wilkes Booth, escaped from the  
Insane Asylum in this city, and has so far  
succeeded in keeping out of the reach of his  
pursuers. He had been in the asylum about  
sixteen months. It is supposed his mind was  
weakened by a close study of religious ques-  
tions. At the session of the Legislature in  
1857 Corbett was appointed Door-keeper,  
and in one of his excited periods he  
disposed of the entire Legislature by  
brandishing a revolver and threatening to  
shoot the Sergeant-at-arms, the Speaker,  
and other members whom he fancied had  
wronged him. Following this episode he  
was examined and sent to the asylum, where  
he has since remained, showing no signs of  
permanent improvement. He was taken out  
in the asylum grounds this morning, with  
other patients, for regular morning exercise.  
A horse which belonged to a visitor stood  
near the building, saddled and bridled, and  
catching sight of it, Corbett sprang from the  
rauds, unloosed the animal, sprang into the  
saddle and was away before the guards could  
hardly realize what had happened.

Corbett has been more or less violent for  
some time, and he has made numerous  
threats that he would escape and would kill  
the Governor, State officers, Probate Judge  
and others who had anything to do with his  
incarceration. It had been unusually vio-  
lent and demonstrative during the past week,  
and this fact created the apprehension that  
Corbett would endeavor to carry out his  
threats. A guard was hurriedly dispatched  
to the State House to warn the officials. The  
police were informed, and a policeman and  
a guard patrolled the grounds until noon.  
The guard is still on duty at the State House.  
Gov. Martin apprehended no harm from  
Corbett. It is supposed now that instead of  
starting for this city Corbett started for his  
home in Cloud County, which he believes is  
being occupied by his enemies, whom he has  
sworn to kill. He is probably making a reck-  
less ride, with his face to the West, and will  
be heard from along the way.

Boston Corbett, who shot Wilkes  
Booth, is living in Camden, N. J., and  
on week days follows the profession  
of hatter in Philadelphia. He preaches  
every Sunday in the Independent  
Methodist church in Camden, where  
he is very popular.—July 21, 1874.

# THE SLAYER OF BOOTH.

A Man Who Knew Boston Corbett  
Tells of His Habits and Manners.

Corbett's Story of the Killing of Mr.  
Lincoln's Assassin — Corbett's  
Prayer, Etc.

[From the *North American Review*.]

The writer had a personal acquaintance with Boston Corbett, who avenged the death of President Lincoln in so tragic a manner on the night of April 26, 1865.

During the year 1875, while attending a soldiers' reunion of blue and gray, at Caldwell, O., I first met Mr. Corbett. The town was small and an immense crowd had gathered, Gen. Sherman, among others, being present. Corbett and I were assigned to the same room for the night. I found him a nervous, excitable man, always the center of attraction, with a keen, but wild, look in his eyes, and an interminable restlessness of body and limb. He was then a preacher, regularly ordained, I think. He lead a prayer-meeting in the village church while there. He was always well armed, in self-defense, as he explained, and his experience while at Caldwell showed that he had some reason to fear violence. He got into an exciting argument with several men one afternoon over the question as to whether Booth had really been killed at all. Hot words ensued, a rush was made towards Corbett, and in an instant the gleaming barrel of his revolver flushed in the faces of his opponents. It was with considerable difficulty that they were separated and peace restored.

Corbett claimed to those of us whom he considered his friends that he had been hounded for years by men who were high in authority at Washington at the time of the assassination, and that they caused him to lose several important positions after he went into civil life, and had refused to shake hands with him or to answer his salutation on the streets. The only reason he assigned for this was that his bullet had deprived the Washington authorities of an opportunity to make a grand display in the execution of Booth.

Be this as it may, it is certain that Corbett was always on the watch for bodily harm from some source. During the night I shared a bed with him; this was exemplified. It was a close, hot night. We slept on the ground floor, with the window raised. Corbett walked the floor for ten minutes after I was in bed. He would frequently clasp his hands and exclaim: "The Lord have mercy on my soul!" At last he knelt down and offered a fervent prayer, after which he placed a large revolver under his pillow and went to bed. He then told me the whole history of that dark night in Virginia. He said no words could express the resigned 'tred, and yet heroic look, of Booth's face.

It was lighted up by the flames of the tobacco barn in which he had taken refuge from his pursuers. To the call for surrender, Booth uttered back words of scorn and defiance, and turned his back on the troops derision. Corbett said he could stand it longer, and, although the orders were to take Booth alive, if possible, he raised his revolver and fired. The wound in Booth's head was said to have been within half an inch of the location of Lincoln's fatal wound.

Corbett went to sleep, and I followed him on, with a restless, troubled sleep, in which I dreamed of something which made me awaken Corbett. He sat up in bed, drew out his pistol and covered me with it. I assured him it was all a dream, and he calmed down again. For several years afterward I received occasional letters from Mr. Corbett, and he finally drifted to Kansas, where, through the aid of some friends, he was appointed doorman of the House of Representatives during the winter of 1887. While there his mind became seriously affected, and he suddenly appeared in the house one morning with a revolver in each hand, and attempted to kill the Speaker and others. He was promptly removed to the Insane Asylum.

Early in the year 1887, and while he was in the State House at Topeka, I sent a note to Corbett, asking him to write me an account of the capture and death of Booth, which he did. A copy of his reply is given herewith. I have every reason to think Mr. Corbett's memory was in fair condition when he wrote the article, and it may safely be accepted as a correct narration of the incidents of a dark hour in the nation's history.

R. B. HOOVER.

## Boston Corbett's Story.

In camp, at Vienna, Va., on the morning of April 15, 1885, the news reached us that President Lincoln had been shot the night

before; later news said he was alive, but there was no hope of his recovery. Our regiment (the 6th New York Cavalry) was immediately ordered out in pursuit of the assassin. Deployed as skirmishers, we advanced down to the Potomac River. When near the river, we saw the flag at half-mast on one of the forts, and we knew our President was dead. We returned to camp unsuccessful, but were soon afterward sent to Washington, to go in any direction required to scout for Booth.

Our regiment was soon cut up into detachments, all engaged in the same work, under different leaders. Col. N. B. Switzer commanding the main body of the men; Maj. Bosworth, another portion of our command; another party under command of First Lieut. Ed P. Doherty, with twenty-six enlisted men, also accompanied by two detectives, to aid in the capture. They had photographs of Booth, Herold and Surratt.

At the Sixth street wharf we took the steam tug John S. Ide, under Capt. Henry Wilson, who conveyed us to Belle Plain, where we landed and at once began the search between the two rivers—Potomac and Rappahannock. At Port Conway the ferryman recognized two of the pictures and said: "These two men crossed my ferry yesterday. Willie, J. H., a Confederate officer," he said, "aided them on their way, giving Booth a lift on his boat" after crossing the river." We followed the few given, captured J. H., who was compelled to guide us to the place where he had left the men. Arriving at Garrett's farm, the Lieutenant said to me: "Booth is in that house; ride through the command and see that every man's pistol is in readiness for use." I did so, and supplied two of our men with caps for their revolvers who were out of caps.

On entering the premises, we found the men were no longer in the house, but had taken refuge in the barn. A surrender was demanded and refused, Booth declaring that he would not be taken alive. After much parleying Herold concluded to surrender, and was at once put under guard. The tobacco barn was then fired by Conger (the detective), and Booth could then be seen. A single shot from a Colt's revolver brought him down, and the capture was effected. A doctor was sent for, who pronounced the wound fatal. Inside of three hours he was dead. Mr. Conzer chose me as an escort, and we started for Belle Plain, and he there took steamer for Washington, and before evening closed the news had flashed over the wires that Booth was taken.

April 28, 1865, was the day when God avenged Abraham Lincoln's death.

Our captive was deposited on the monitor Montauk, at the navy yard at Washington.

During the intervals of our different scouts I attended prayer-meeting one night at Wesley Chapel. The leader said, "Brother Corbett, lead us in prayer." I prayed, "O Lord, lay not innocent blood to our charge; but bring the guilty speedily to punishment." Afterward, when the assassin lay at my feet, a wounded man, and I saw the bullet had taken effect about in back of the ear, and I remembered that Mr. Lincoln was wounded about that part of the head, I said, "What a God we serve! I little thought, when I offered that prayer a week ago, that it would be answered in this way."

BOSTON CORBETT,

Late Sergt. Co. L, 16th N. Y. Cavalry.  
Written at Topeka, Kan., January 19, 1887.

**Man Who Shot Booth.**

It will be remembered that Boston Corbett, the man who killed J. Wilkes Booth, lived for many years in Cloud county, Kansas. About ten years ago he was elected doorkeeper of the Kansas house of representatives and while holding that position went crazy and was sent to the asylum. Later he was released from custody and went off to Texas, where it is presumed he died.

The discussion now going on in the periodicals over the death and burial of Booth recalls to the editor of the Concordia Empire that, something like a dozen years ago, the ladies of the Presbyterian church in that town seized upon the idea of having Corbett give a lecture upon the killing of Booth, and a committee was appointed to wait upon him. One of the committeemen was the editor of the Empire, and he thus describes what followed:

"We found him at home in his dug-out, a kind of hole in the side of a steep hill with a brownstone front and a roof of brush, clay and clapboards. There was but one room and the furniture was an old stove, a table, a chair, a home-made bed, a trunk, a box or two, a well-worn Bible, and a variety of firearms. Mr. Corbett had received a pension of several hundred dollars a short time before and invested what he had not given away to others that he thought might be needing money in a flock of sheep. A herd of antelopes would have served him just as well—he had no practical knowledge of the use of sheep. He was very hospitable, told us much of his history and readily consented to deliver a lecture on the capture of Booth and his experiences in Andersonville. *1857*

"A packed house greeted him on the night set. By way of introduction the choir sang a song. Some sentiment of the song set him off on a regular sermon (he was in the habit of preaching occasionally) and for nearly an hour he talked, but failed to either capture Booth or get to Andersonville. At last the pastor reminded him that he was to talk of Andersonville and Booth. He apologized for his forgetfulness, and in about a dozen words told that he was captured and landed safe inside the walls of Andersonville prison. The first man he met was an old acquaintance, who told him that over in a certain portion of the prison they were holding a prayer meeting. He went directly to it. Then he talked for half an hour about the prayer meeting, which, as far as his description went, might have been held in Cloud county or the backwoods of Arkansas.

"Being reminded again that he was forgetting all about the capture of Booth, he apologized, and said in substance: 'We surrounded the barn in which we found he had taken refuge. We demanded that he surrender, but he refused. We then set fire to the barn. By the light he saw one of our men and raised his revolver to shoot him. I was peeping through a crack, saw him raise his arm, and to keep him from killing one of our men I fired and killed him. The bullet went into his head in nearly the same course as his bullet had entered Lincoln's head.' This is

as full a history as he saw fit to give of an incident that had called forth many long articles during the last thirty years, and about which none knew more than did our neighbor, Boston Corbett."—Kansas City Journal.

## Corbett, the Slayer of Booth.

BOSTON CORBETT, the soldier who, in his way, "avenged" the death of Abraham Lincoln by killing his murderer, was a man of intense moral convictions and Biblical faith. This characteristic might have distinguished him, as it did "Chinese" Gordon, in some heroic plane of achievement, but Corbett was a religious zealot without mental equipoise, and his eccentric actions gave him the reputation of a "crank."

After the deed that made him historic he lived alone in a dugout in Kansas, rarely appearing in public except when he felt moved to preach, or when he happened to be called to account for some odd infraction of civil duty. He usually went armed, and once, by a show of his pistol, he suddenly "adjourned" a court where he had been taken on some complaint, and his trial was likely, he thought, to be a mockery of justice.

His difficulties with his fellow-men were sometimes settled, however, without so deadly a threat—although not always without muscular methods. He was a strong man, and his striking appearance, with his long black hair parted in the middle, combined with the general knowledge of his tragic record, was apt to demoralize an adversary.

A young rowdy disturbed him one evening while he was preaching in a schoolhouse. He remonstrated, but the disturbancee continued. Corbett called on a constable who was present to arrest the rowdy, but he refused.

"Then," said Corbett, "if you can't put this young rascal out, nor be civil yourself, I'll put you both out," and he soon had the two men outside the door.

This unique character, with all his singularities, was usually, perhaps always, a champion of "the right side," but his poor judgment and martial temper made him both an unwise evangelist and an unsafe citizen. His belligerent Christianity showed a strange understanding of the Book whose every word he literally believed.

We have spoken of him in the past tense. If he is still living, he is doubtless an advocate of the rough-shod theory for civilizing the Philippines—"with the Bible in one hand and the shotgun in the other." But Boston Corbett, the slayer of Wilkes Booth, has never been heard of since his escape, years ago, from the Topeka asylum, where he had been confined as dangerously insane.

# Recollections of Boston Corbett By Eyewitness of the Booth Shooting

Member of 16th New York Cavalry When a Detachment From That Regiment Surrounded the Barn in Which the Slayer of Lincoln Was Shot Gives His Impressions of Corbett.

BY JOHN C. COLLINS.



HE 15th day of April, 1865, will always remain a memorable day in American history, and the events which immediately followed it remain indelibly impressed upon my memory, although I was but a boy of twelve years at the time and had been surfeited by the excitement of two years in the very thick of the war.

During the last two years of the war I had been a sort of "boy of the regiment" with the famous old 16th New York Cavalry, and was in camp with that regiment at Vienna, Va., a short distance from Washington, on the day mentioned. It was a day of intense grief, for on that day the great President who had carried the nation safely through the war between the north and the south became the victim of an assassin's bullet, and sealed by his death, as a final sacrifice, his years of devotion and travail, of patient and wise struggle to save the nation.

Some time between midnight and daylight, April 15, the buglers of our regiment sounded "hoots and saddies." In a few minutes the entire regiment of about a thousand men was in the saddle and, like a flash, had disappeared in the darkness.

Flags at half mast shortly after daylight, followed by rumors that President Lincoln, Gen. Grant and other heads of the government had been assassinated by rebel conspirators in Washington, gave the first suggestion to those remaining in camp that the cavalry scouts of the 16th New York had gone out in the night on more serious business than one more attempt to get Mosby. It was soon learned that the President had been shot and killed, that J. Wilkes Booth, the assassin, had escaped, and the men of the 16th, well equipped by special knowledge of the country, were out in search of the murderer.

Something more than a year previously I had induced, with much special pleading and not a little strategy, a relative, a popular member of the 16th Cavalry, to allow me to accompany him on his return to the camp after a brief furlough to his home. It was expected that this visit would be of short duration and that after I had had a few days' experience of actual camp life I would be returned to my home. But while out with a scouting party two or three days after rejoicing his regiment, this relative was seriously wounded in a skirmish with Mosby's men. When he returned from the hospital, some three months later, he immediately got into trouble again with Col. Mosby and his men, who had made an attack Saturday afternoon, June 23, 1864, on the pickets at Annandale, Va. This time Mosby got him and some fifty others, and his next six or eight months were spent in southern prisons.

first enlistment, it was said, was in Boston. His history previous to this enlistment is a blank. It was said the name Boston was given to him because of his enlistment in Boston. As to what finally became of him I was recently told by good authority that some years after the war he became insane and was confined in a Kansas Insane asylum. Being mildly insane he was allowed certain outdoor privileges. He took a walk one day a short distance into the country. He did not return, and beyond finding his coat half a mile or thereabout from the asylum no trace of him whatever has since been found. He disappeared as if from the face of the earth.

This partakes strongly of the mysterious. That nothing whatever should be known of the early or final days of the man, peculiarly religious, claiming divine guidance, who was the instrument in carrying out the decree of punishment to a murderer who of all murderers was the most despicable and inexcusable—this to some will seem to lie within the borderland of the mysterious, and possibly the supernatural. I myself believe it quite possible that he was

finally killed by some one who never forgave him for shooting Booth.

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Meantime, I had found quarters with one of his intimate friends, the commissary sergeant of Company K. The men took me up and made me a sort of "boy of the regiment"—its mascot, perhaps we would now say, a little tow-headed boy, not looking much over ten years old. I was given a pony which had been condemned because too small for a cavalryman; a uniform was cut and made for me by some soldier who had been a tailor, and for nearly two years, extending to some months after the close of the war, I enjoyed all the privileges and lived in much of the life of the regiment, except picket duty and the long gouts after Mosby. I think it was even whispered that the little white-headed boy had some occult influence in the regiment which came to the regiment as the saviors of J. Wilkes Booth and the great honor, as it was considered, that one of their number avenged the death of the martyr President with a bullet through the brain of his murderer.

For the next few days following April 15 all was turmoil and confusion with us who remained behind. The tents, camp paraphernalia and personal belongings of the men were packed in large covered

camp wagons and we soon found ourselves in a rude camp on the edge of the settled part of Washington.

The thousand or more cavalry scouts of the 16th were broken up into squads of twenty to fifty, each of which was diligently engaged in searching over the country in Maryland and Virginia adjacent to the Potomac and Rappahannock rivers.

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Finally one afternoon a detachment under command of Lieut. Dougherty returned, and the announcement was made that they had at last been successful. Booth and Herold had been trailed to their hiding place. Herold was a prisoner and Booth had been shot and killed by Sergt. Boston Corbett.

The shooting of Booth by Corbett made the latter a conspicuous figure at the time. Very little is known about the early life, where he came from or in fact what finally became of the man who was the executioner of J. Wilkes Booth. His

Corbett was an eccentric. I do not recall any other man in our regiment who made open religious profession. His tent in the camp at Vienna, Va., was only a few feet from mine across the narrow company street. I recall him distinctly with hair parted in the middle. When I asked him once why he wore his hair in this way he replied that it was because Jesus did so. The men made much sport of his religious views and eccentricities, but this he took in good part. He was a brave fellow and was one of the party of fifty surrounded and captured June 24, 1864, by Mosby and his 300 men, of whom my relative was also one, and he, too, spent many months in 1864 in Andersonville prison. I have been told that he was one of the leaders, if not the principal one, in the prayer meeting when water was prayed for, and it was said that a spring of pure water suddenly burst from the ground. Of that, however, I know nothing definitely.

Corbett was very much elated and excited, as will naturally be supposed, because of the fact that he had shot the assassin of the President. He gave me his photograph with his autograph upon it a few days after he had killed Booth, and I remember his placing the forefinger of his right hand in the palm of my hand and saying that that was

the finger that had pulled the trigger and sent the bullet through the brain of Booth. He often expressed the view

that he had been divinely selected and guided as Booth's executioner and the avenger of the great-hearted President.

The men of Sergt. Dougherty's scouting squad and Corbett told an interest-

ing story of how late on the afternoon of April 25 they found a man by the name of Jebb, one of Mosby's men, at a hotel in Bowling Green. The two government detectives, Col. Baker and Col. Conger, were with them. Jebb told Col. Conger, persuaded more or less by the methods used on such occasions, that he had ferried Booth and Herold

across the Rappahannock and taken them to the farm of a man named Garret, some three miles from Bowling Green, on the way to Port Royal, where he said he supposed they then were.

On receiving this information the party set out at once for Garret's farm, where they arrived about 2 o'clock the

following morning. Finding Garret and his two sons, they inquired for Booth and Herold. Garret said they had gone away some time before into the woods. Those were terrible days, and the men who were trailing the assassins of Abraham Lincoln would stand no trifling. A rope was called for and a noose was soon about the neck of Garret.

When the sons saw the serious nature of the business they pleaded that the father might be forgiven and confessed that the two men were hiding in the barn. Lieut. Dougherty immediately placed his men about the barn in charge of Sergt. Corbett, and an effort began to induce the men to come out and surrender. Booth had with him a carbine and two revolvers and abundant ammunition, the carbine and one of the pistols being the arms taken beyond the Potomac by Mrs. Surratt a day or two previous to the assassination, and being concealed where Booth could find them after his escape out of Washington.

Booth was heard to call Herold a coward and to upbraid him for evidently wishing to surrender. Then he called out that he had a man in there who wanted

to surrender. Herold came out and was placed under guard. Booth refused to surrender and finally wisps of hay were pulled from the barn through large cracks between the boards, twisted, set on fire and thrust back into the barn. This ignited the hay and lighted up the interior. Previous to this Corbett had gone to Lieut. Dougherty and Baker and offered to go in single-handed and capture Booth, saying that he and his men could be seen through the cracks in the barn by Booth, but that they could not see Booth. Under these circumstances, Corbett said, he and his men were in as much or more danger on the outside of the barn as they would be by an attempt to capture Booth by a direct assault.

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As soon as the barn was lighted by the fire Booth was seen walking up and down, his broken leg supported by a crutch. Suddenly the crack of a pistol shot was heard and Booth collapsed on the floor. At first it was thought that he had committed suicide. Corbett immediately reported that seeing Booth raise his carbine and take aim at one of the soldiers exposed to view through one of the wide cracks in the barn, and knowing that delay meant death for the soldier, he had taken deliberate aim with his big cavalry revolver and shot Booth, the bullet striking him under the ear, going through the back of his head and coming out a little higher under the opposite ear. Corbett said he could have shot Booth much easier a few moments before he fired the fatal shot, for Booth was coming directly toward him and was very near to him, but he did not wish to shoot him, as he was not then attempting to kill some one else.

Booth was taken in a dying condition from the barn and placed on a straw tick on the veranda of the Garret house, where he died some three hours later, about 7 o'clock. Almost his last words were: "Tell my mother that I died for my country."

Then followed the trial by the military commission appointed by President Johnson of eight persons charged with conspiring with Booth to assassinate President Lincoln and other heads of the government.

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The execution was to take place in a small prison courtyard of perhaps 250 feet square. This courtyard was enclosed on two sides by a brick wall about thirty feet high and two and a half feet wide. There were two entrances to this prison courtyard, one through the prison itself and the other through a large gateway in the brick wall. July 4, the day of the execution, was the day when it was feared the volcano would burst forth, and rebel conspirators and sympathizers with Booth, of whom, without doubt, there were thousands in Washington, would do the worst deed of all the years of the war. If ever the government of the United States was on the alert and had left nothing undone in the way of military preparation and would show no mercy it was on this day. There were soldiers everywhere, and they were short and fierce in their dealings with strangers.

About fifteen feet in front of the high fence, through which the approach was made to the old penitentiary from the city, there was a double line of soldiers for the entire length, standing by twos, with bayonets touching one another. If one succeeded in going past these guards he would find that the only entrances through the fence were a carriage way and a narrow doorway. Two soldiers guarded the gates through which carriages entered, and other soldiers guarded the small doorway for people on foot with passes. On the inside of the high fence patrols of three to five soldiers with loaded guns and fixed bayonets marched at quickstep, so that it seemed to be almost a continuous line of troops marching rapidly around the inside of the fence. The entrances to the prison courtyard were equally well guarded.

I have never quite known exactly how I did it, but I actually went through all these lines of troops without a pass, and in less than twenty minutes from the first attempt I was stationed not thirty feet away from the scaffold and in full view of everything said or done

in connection with the execution. I suppose the fact that I was dressed in uniform had much to do with it. I think I am the youngest of living people who witnessed the most historical of all executions in this country. The scaffold platform was about ten or twelve feet above the ground and about twenty feet square. By the side of the scaffold and in plain sight of the prisoners were four newly dug graves and four cheap-looking, unpainted pine boxes for coffins.

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Shortly before 2 o'clock the doors leading into the courtyard from the old penitentiary were opened and the procession slowly made its way to the scaffold and up the thirteen steps to seats on the platform. Mrs. Surratt came first, assisted by a guard. Others following were Payne, Herold and Atzerodt, in the order

named, each attended by a guard. Mrs. Surratt moved very slowly and with great difficulty. She seemed to be on the point of collapse. Payne was indifferent and careless. His hat fell off while he was sitting listening to the reading of the death warrant, and when it was returned to him he pushed it aside, sitting bareheaded afterward under the blazing sun.

Then all at once they were all standing upon the trap door and the nooses at the ends of the dangling ropes were placed carefully around their necks. Gen. J. F. Hartranft, governor of military prisons, clapped his hands twice, and instantly four human beings dropped through the opening. The last act of punishment and just retribution for one of the most awful crimes in history was over, and, boy though I was, I turned away with a sensation of horror and faintness and a feeling, I have never since lost, that I had no wish ever to witness another such scene.



BOSTON CORBETT.

John C. Collins, the Author of This Article, Was With the 16th New York Cavalry When a Detachment From That Regiment Surrounded the Barn in Which Wilkes Booth, the Slayer of Lincoln, Was Shot—Mr. Collins Has Preserved A Strong Recollection of "Boston" Corbet—Col. Crook Recalls Lincoln's Three Dreams of Assassination.

# WHO SHOT BOOTH

## BOSTON CORBET,

**T**HE fifteenth day of April, 1865, will always remain a memorable day in American history and the events which immediately followed it remain indelibly impressed upon my memory, although I was but a boy of 12 years at that time and had been surfeited by the excitement of two years in the very thick of the war. During the last two years of the war I had been a sort of "boy of the regiment" with the famous old Sixteenth New York cavalry and was in camp with that regiment at Vienna, Va., a short distance from Washington, on the day mentioned. It was a day of intense grief, for on that day the great President who had carried the nation safely through the war between the North and the South became the victim of an assassin's bullet and sealed by his death, as a final sacrifice, his years of devotion and travail, of patient and wise struggle to save the nation.

Some time between midnight and daylight, April 15, the buglers of our regiment sounded "boots and saddles." In a few minutes the entire regiment of about 1000 men was in the saddle and like a flash had disappeared in the darkness.

Flags at half mast shortly after daylight, followed by rumors that President Lincoln, General Grant, and other heads of the government had been assassinated by rebel conspirators in Washington, gave the first suggestion to those remaining in camp that the cavalry scouts of the Sixteenth New York had gone in the night on more serious business than one more attempt to get Mosby. It was soon learned that the President had been shot and killed, that J. Wilkes Booth, the assassin, had

caped, and the men of the Sixteenth, well equipped by special knowledge of the country, were out in search of the murderer.

Something more than a year previously had induced, with much special pleading and not a little strategy, a relative, a popular member of the Sixteenth cavalry, to allow me to accompany him on his return to the camp after a brief furlough to his home. It was expected that this visit would be of short duration and that after I had had a few days' experience of actual camp life I would be returned to my home. But while out with a scouting party two or three days after rejoining his regiment this relative was seriously wounded in a skirmish with Mosby's men. When he returned from the hospital some three months later, he immediately got into trouble again with Colonel Mosby and his men, who had made an attack on the pickets at Annandale, Va. This time Mosby got him and some 50 others and his next six or eight months were spent in Southern prisons.

Meanwhile I had found quarters with one of his intimate friends, the commissary sergeant of Company K. The men took me up and made me a sort of "boy of the regiment"—its mascot, perhaps we would now say, a little towheaded by not looking much over 10 years old. I was given a pony which had been condemned because too small for a cavalryman; a uniform was cut and made for me by some soldier who had been a tailor, and for nearly two years, extending to some months after the close of the war, I enjoyed all the privileges and shared in much of the life of the regiment except picket duty and the long scouts after Mosby. I think it good authority that some years after

white headed boy had some occult influence in the renown which came to the regiment as the captors of J. Wilkes Booth and the great honor, as it was considered, that one of their number avenged the death of the martyr President with a bullet through the brain of his murderer.

For the next few days following April 15 all was tumult and confusion with us who remained behind. The tents, camp paraphernalia and personal belongings of the men were packed in large covered camp wagons and we soon found ourselves in a rude camp on the edge of the settled part of Washington.

The thousand or more cavalry scouts of the Sixteenth were broken up into squads of 20 to 50, each of which was diligently engaged in searching over the country in Maryland and Virginia adjacent to the Potomac and Rappahannock rivers.

Finally one afternoon a detachment under command of Lieutenant Dougherty returned, and the announcement was made that they had at last been successful. Booth and Herold had been trailed to their hiding place. Herold was a prisoner and Booth had been shot and killed by Sergeant Boston Corbet.

The shooting of Booth by Corbet made Corbet a conspicuous figure at the time. Very little is known about the early life, where he came from, or in fact what finally became of the man who was the executioner of J. Wilkes Booth. His first enlistment, it was said, was in Boston. His history previous to this enlistment is blank. It was said the name Boston was given him because of his enlistment in Boston. As to what finally became of him I was recently told by

confining in a maniacal asylum. Being mildly insane he was allowed certain outdoor privileges. He took a walk one day a short distance into the country. He did not return, and beyond finding his coat half a mile or thereabout from the asylum no trace of him whatever has since been found. He disappeared as if from the face of the earth.

This partakes strongly of the mysterious. That nothing whatever should be known of the early or final days of the man, peculiarly religious, claiming divine guidance, who was the instrument in carrying out the decree of punishment to a murderer who of all murderers was the most despicable and inexcusable—this to some will seem to lie within the borderland of the mysterious, and possibly the supernatural. I myself believe it quite possible that he was finally killed by some one who never forgave him for shooting Booth.

Corbet was an eccentric. I do not

recall any other man in our regiment who made open religious profession. His tent in the camp in Vienna, Va., was only a few feet from mine across the narrow company street. I recall him distinctly with hair parted in the middle. When I asked him once why he wore his hair in this way he replied that it was because Jesus did so. The men made much sport of his religious views and eccentricities, but this he took in good part. He was a brave fellow and was one of the party of 50 surrounded and captured June 24, 1864, by Mosby and his 300 men, of whom my relative was also one, and he too spent many months in 1864 in Andersonville prison. I have been told that he was one of the leaders, if not the principal one, in the prayer meeting when water was prayed for, and it was said that a spring of pure water suddenly burst from the ground. Of that, however, I know nothing definitely.

Corbet was very much elated and excited, as will naturally be supposed, because of the fact that he had shot the assassin of the President. He gave me his photograph with his autograph upon it a few days after he had killed Booth, and I remember his placing the forefinger of his right hand in the palm of my hand and saying that that was the finger that had pulled the trigger and sent the bullet through the brain of Booth. He often expressed the view that he had been divinely selected and guided as Booth's executioner and the avenger of the great-hearted President.

The men of Sergeant Dougherty's scouting-squad and Corbet told an interesting story of how late on the afternoon of April 25 they found a man by the name of Jebb, one of Mosby's men, at a hotel in Bowling Green. The two government detectives, Colonel Baker and Colonel Conger were

with them. Jebb told Colonel Conger, persuaded more or less by the methods used on such occasions, that he had ferried Booth and Herold across the Rappahannock and taken them to the farm of a man named Garret, some three miles from Bowling Green on the way to Port Royal, where he said he supposed they then were.

On receiving this information the party set out at once for Garret's farm, where they arrived about 2 o'clock the following morning. Finding Garret and his two sons, they inquired for Booth and Herold. Garret said they had gone away some time before into the woods. Those were terrible days, and the men who were trailing the assassins of Abraham Lincoln would stand no trifling. A rope was called for and a noose was soon about the neck of Garret. When the sons saw the serious nature of the business they pleaded that the father might be forgiven and confessed that the two men were hiding in the barn. Lieutenant Dougherty immediately placed his men about the barn in charge of Sergeant Corbet, and an effort began to induce the men to come out and surrender. Booth had with him a carbine and two revolvers and abundant ammunition, the carbine and one of the pistols being the arms taken beyond the Potomac by Mrs. Surratt a day or two previous to the assassination, and being concealed where Booth could find them after his escape out of Washington.

Booth was heard to call Herold a coward and to upbraid him for evidently wishing to surrender. Then he called out that he had a man in there who wanted to surrender. Herold came out and was placed under guard. Booth refused to surrender and finally wisps of hay were pulled from the barn through large cracks between the boards, twisted, set on fire and thrust back into the barn. This ignited the hay and lighted up the interior. Previous to this Corbet had gone to Lieutenant Dougherty and Baker and offered to go in single handed and capture Booth, saying that he and his men could be seen through the cracks in the barn by Booth, but that they could not see

Booth. Under these circumstances, Corbet said he and his men were in as much or more danger on the outside of the barn as they would be by an attempt to capture Booth by a direct assault.

As soon as the barn was lighted by the fire Booth was seen walking up and down, his broken leg supported by a crutch. Suddenly the crack of a pistol shot was heard and Booth collapsed on the floor. At first it was thought that he had committed suicide. Corbet immediately reported that seeing Booth raise his carbine and take aim at one of the soldiers

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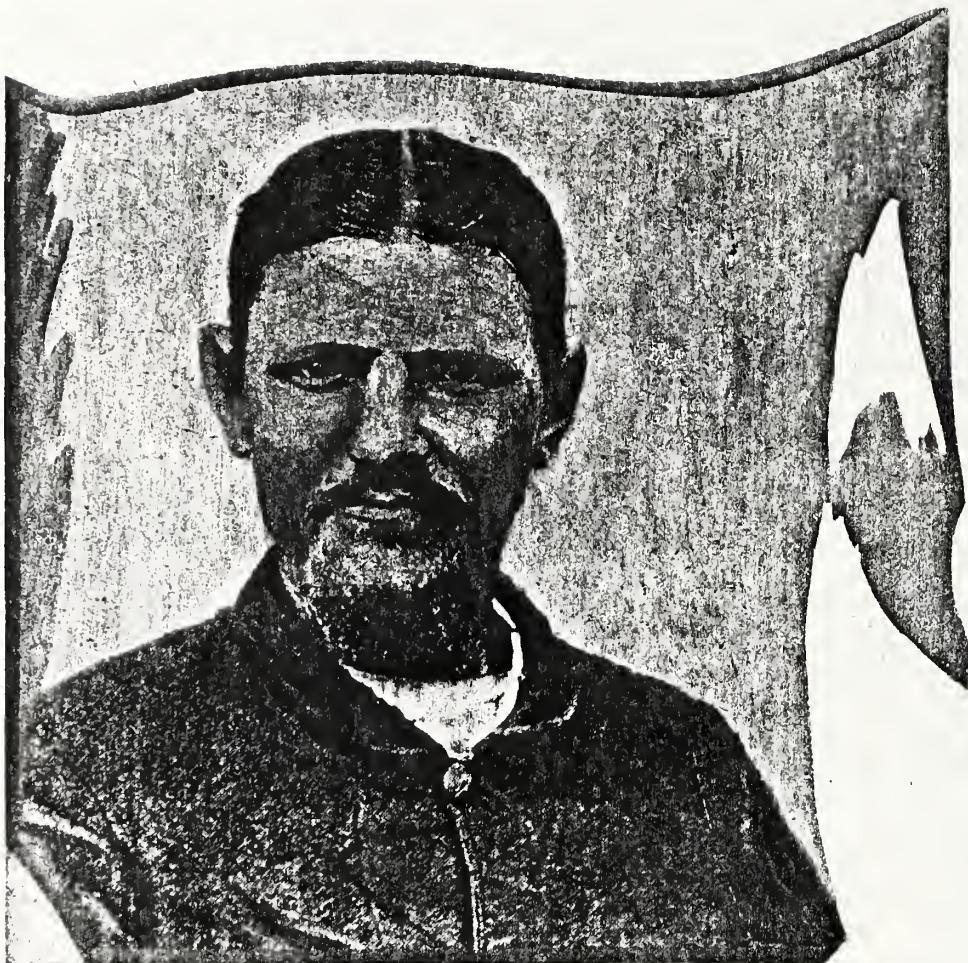
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#### WALTER E. HALE

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About 15 feet in front of the high fence, through which the approach was made to the old penitentiary from the city, there was a double line of soldiers for the entire length standing by twos with bayonets touching one another. If one succeeded in going past these guards he would find that the only entrances through the fence were carriageway and a narrow doorway. Two soldiers guarded the gates through which carriages entered and other soldiers guarded the small doorway for people on foot with passes. On the inside of the high fence patrols of three to five soldiers with loaded guns and fixed bayonets marched at quickstep, so that it seemed to be almost a continuous line of troops marching rapidly around the inside of the fence. The entrances to the prison courtyard were equally well guarded.



**Boston Corbett, who shot Wilkes Booth.**  
Photo courtesy Oldroyd.

*608*  
National Tribune,  
NEW YORK,  
PRISON, Aug. 8, 1912.

## ABOUT BOSTON CORBETT.

### The Man Who Killed Booth Was Eccentric and a Recluse.

Editor National Tribune: I see in your issue of June 27 an inquiry from W. H. Porter as to the whereabouts of Serg't Boston Corbett, of the 16th N. Y. Cav. If it is the Boston Corbett of J. Wilkes Booth fame I can throw a little light on the subject, as I was intimately acquainted with him in Cloud County, Kan. I was County Surveyor of that County in about 1881-3, and was called on by him to set his corners, and mark his lines. He had taken a homestead on a bleak hill about seven miles from Concordia, the County seat, and built a "dug-out," and was living there alone and in abject poverty.

He was a complete recluse and very eccentric; he had but very little to do with his neighbors, and they nothing with him but to torment him and keep him always "in hot water." He had a homestead half-mile square, and cultivated less than five acres right about the center of it, so, as he said, that his neighbors could not come

nearer to him than a quarter of a mile. It worried him to distraction to have any of them plow over the line, which they would do just to aggravate him. But after awhile he got a pension of \$12 a month, with over 100 months' back pay, and that healed him so far as a living was concerned, and to some extent mellowed the rancor between him and his neighbors.

Boston was a religious fanatic and also somewhat of a public speaker, and we used to chip in and buy him a ticket to attend our Reunions, with the hope of having him tell us something about the Booth affair. But he would not talk five minutes till he would switch off on religion, and would sing:

"Dare to be a Daniel,  
Dare to stand alone,  
Dare to have a purpose true,  
Dare to make it known."

Then sometimes he would say, "I feel like I want to pray," and down on his knees he would go and at it.

After he got his pension he began to take some part in public affairs and politics generally, often being delegate to conventions and taking quite an active part, making himself quite useful in the community, and was generally well liked by the people.

He was very free to talk about the Booth affair when he could steer clear of religion long enough to get anything said. He called the shooting "a lamentable necessity," and stoutly maintained that it was an inspired deed. On several occasions he said to me when I visited him at his "dug-out":

"Jake, I heard the voice of God calling on me to fire that shot as plainly as I hear you now, and I verily believe that if I had let that opportunity go by without doing my duty I would have incurred the ill will of the Almighty."

But with all his intense religious propensities he was never found at home or abroad without his implements of self-defense. At the time of the survey of which I have spoken he was standing close to me, watching me trying to settle the compass needle which was showing signs of interruption. Finally I said: "Boston, have you a big knife on you?" "No," said he, "but I have a mighty good revolver here," and as he jerked it out of his pocket I ducked my head so that I actually fell to the ground. I said to him: "Boston, don't you know it is against the law to carry concealed weapons?" "Yes, I do know it," said he, and then he proceeded to explain how he came to go always armed. He said he was always on the lookout for some of Booth's friends to be on his track, and he could never know when he might meet up with some of them in almost any kind of a guise.

At another time he was having a misunderstanding with his neighbors, and he got his gun out and his neighbors all went home, but some one had him arrested and taken into Concordia for trial. During the progress of the trial there was some pretty strong testimony which began to tell on Boston's nerves, so he arose and addressed the court:

"Your honor, I think it is about time for this court to adjourn." And adjourn it did.

Deck Houston, an attorney in the case, crouched under the table. L. J. Crans, another attorney, climbed the handrail, lifting his stiff leg over with both hands. The presiding Justice crouched behind the desk, and Boston deliberately walked out of the court room.

Some time after that the Justice said to John Linton, the Deputy, who had originally brought Boston in: "John, I want you to go out and bring Boston in again, and let us finish the case."

"Your honor," said John, "I have handed in my resignation, to take effect immediately."

It is very doubtful if it was ever called for trial again.

What finally became of him I know only from hearsay, but information I consider reliable. After I left Kansas, at the session of the Legislature of 1887, I think, Boston was made Doorkeeper for the Lower House. Things went along all right for a time, till one day something went all wrong, according to Boston's notion. He got out his gun, and said he thought it was time for the House to adjourn, which it proceeded to do right then, without waiting for the Chaplain to pronounce the benediction. Boston then left, and was seen no more. It was afterwards learned that he had strayed away down into the far south-western part of the Union or perhaps into Mexico, and there passed away some years later. — Jacob Short, 13th Ind., 214 Warren Avenue, Tampa, Fla.



SERG'T BOSTON CORBETT.

# OKLAHOMAN'S STORY HE WAS J. W. BOOTH, SLAYER OF LINCOLN, REFUTED

BY COL. CHARLES H. HASKELL

Now comes a yarn out of Enid, Okla., that after years of investigation conclusion is reached by interested persons that John St. Helen, a well-known character of that place, who passed on in 1903, was none other than John Wilkes Booth, assassin of President Abraham Lincoln.

The story reads well, but there is no follow-up information that supports confirmation of the essential details thus related. St. Helen, while under the influence of liquor, shortly before his death is asserted to "have talked too much." In fact, his open confession of guilt excited no one and nothing seems to have been done about it at the time.

As a cub reporter on a Kansas City newspaper I chanced to know intimately Boston Corbett, who during the Civil War was a trooper sergeant in a Michigan cavalry regiment and who caught and shot John Wilkes Booth on the evening of April 26, 1865, in Garrett's barn on Bowling Green, twenty miles from Fredericksburg. Corbett told me he not only shot Booth but saw him die.

Booth fired a bullet from a Derringer pistol into the back of the martyred Lincoln's head April 14, 1865, after stealthily invading the President's box at Ford's Theater in Washington.

#### AVENGER RECALLED

Boston Corbett told me many times about the chase and killing of Booth. I knew Corbett when he lived on a prairie claim near Concordia, Kan. He utterly failed as a farmer. He frequently came to my home town of Clay Center to speak at reunions of Civil War veterans or to preach the Gospel according to the tenets of the Methodist faith.

At times Boston took great delight in referring to himself as an evangelist. Pioneer Kansans said he looked, talked and acted much like old John Brown of Ossawatomie and the Harper's Ferry tragedy. In later life Boston was smooth shaven, parted his iron-gray hair in the middle and the heavy locks were barbed squarely off at his coat collar.

Three subjects always appeared uppermost in his mind: How he caught and killed Booth, his own depths of patriotic endeavor coupled with religious fervor, and how the martyred Lincoln, "by his own honest efforts, rose from humble beginning to the highest station of honor and worth in the land, largely from the directing influence of a gentle but intelligent stepmother, who taught him the beauty, kindness and possibilities of life."



COL. CHARLES H. HASKELL

#### STORY CONFIRMED

Five years ago I repeated Boston Corbett's account of the flight, pursuit, capture and killing of Booth to the late Dr. John Cobb of Los Angeles, a Union veteran officer in the medical department during the Civil War, who was born in Washington, went to school with Booth in Baltimore, knew the intimate details of the assassination of President Lincoln and personally knew everyone in the plot who finally was hanged or imprisoned. He confirmed the correctness of Boston Corbett's account of the historic tragedy.

So here, then, is what Corbett said:

"Booth's crime instantly caused

a flame of personal revenge and vindictiveness to seize army commanders. Col. Conger of my regiment ordered every man out in units of ten or more to rigorously scour the country in all directions from Washington. We stayed out night and day searching highways, byways, farmhouses and buildings for a trace of the fugitives.

"My troop of twenty-eight men hit a hot trail several times, only to lose it. But we kept going, scarcely halting to eat or sleep. Finally Co. Conger, who headed our detachment, was informed that a man with a broken leg and carrying a crutch, was riding horseback some distance ahead of us. He was accompanied by a young man who afterward proved to be Harold. It was this man who held Booth's horse at the rear of Ford's Theater and who assisted the assassin into the saddle and accompanied him into Maryland. We were again on the assassin's trail, never to lose it."

#### FUGITIVES LOCATED

"I had a splendid mount and rode on ahead. I located the fugitives in the Garrett barn and so informed Col. Conger. It was dusk when we surrounded the place. Col. Conger personally ordered Booth and Harold to surrender. The latter insisted on a parley. Booth was defiant. Harold finally walked out with his hands up. Booth shouted: 'I'll never be taken alive.'

"Col. Conger then ordered the barn set on fire. I was told to get Booth out of the barn alive, if possible, but get him out. I looked my carbine over carefully and then rushed Booth, hoping to personally overpower him.

"Flames lighted up Booth's hiding place. I first saw him through a crack in the barn. He was leaning on his crutch with a dragoon pistol in his left hand. The instant he saw me he raised his arm to fire. But I was too quick for him. I fired only once, but that was enough. I sent a bullet through his head. He dropped and was unconscious when I reached him. The fire was burning so fiercely I had to work fast to get Booth out. Soldiers rushed to my aid and, under orders of Col. Conger, we carried Booth into the farmhouse.

#### MANY VIEW BODY

"The assassin certainly presented a sorry appearance. He was very dirty and had suffered great pain from his broken leg. He died two hours and a half later. Dr. Mudd had been found by Booth thirty miles out of Washington in Maryland and it was he who dressed Booth's leg and provided him with a crutch."

Booth's body, wrapped in an old army blanket, was immediately taken to Washington and properly identified. Dr. Cobb told me he saw the corpse and informed superiors there was no doubt of the identity. In fact, Booth was so well known at the capital, and so many people viewed the body who knew him, the government ceased any further efforts along these lines.

The body found temporary interment at the government arsenal in an unmarked grave. A year later Edwin Booth, the great actor, made a personal appeal to President Johnson for the body. Sexton Weaver, of Christ Church, Baltimore, was commissioned to secretly receive it. Since then the assassin has rested in an unmarked grave in Baltimore beside his father and other members of the Booth family. Booth's heart and brain were on exhibition in a Washington medical museum for several years.

Of the conspirators, Payne, Harald, Atzerot and Mrs. Surratt were hanged. Dr. Mudd, Arnold and McLaughlin were given life sentences. Dr. Mudd alone was pardoned later on.

When Boston Corbett left the Army he went to "Bleeding Kansas." He was generally well received everywhere he went in the Sunflower State, filling lecture dates and pulpit engagements. Because he killed President Lincoln's assassin he figured the government owed him a handsome pension. All he ever got was \$8 a month. Boston brooded over his financial condition. He tried to farm his 160-acre claim near Concordia. He had a fairly good stand of wheat in the fall of 1887. A neighbor drove cattle across this field, ignoring Boston's warning not to, and was promptly shot. Boston used the same carbine he carried in killing Booth. The neighbor soon recovered and swore out a warrant for Boston's arrest, charging an attempt to murder. The Prosecuting Attorney of Cloud county first haled Corbett before the probate judge on a sanity inquiry. Word was sent him to come in and he did.

#### GUN EMPTIES ROOM

Boston, still carrying his carbine rode into town on a cayuse, hitched it in front of the probate judge's office, and for an hour quietly listened to one witness after another testifying concerning his erratic conduct. Vexed at some ruling of the court, Boston, gun in hand, arose and calmly said: "I think this farce has gone about far enough," and with that he turned loose his artillery. He said afterward he didn't want to kill anybody, but desired to teach the court and others he was not to be trifled with.

In less than ten seconds the crowded courtroom was cleared, except for two people. The corpulent probate judge fell over backwards and was flattened out behind the bench as close to the floor as he could get. Boston strode out the door and rode home. Influential persons in the county seemed to think Boston had been mistreated, and he was never molested after that.

A month later I had been sent to Concordia by my newspaper to cover a murder trial. I again met Boston and he appeared happy because he had just received assurance that if he would go to Topeka he would be given an appointment as doorkeeper during the session of the Legislature.

#### **GUNPLAY AVERTED**

We happened to be seat-mates in coach on the same Union Pacific train leaving Concordia for Topeka. Boston was relating plans for publishing a book, when his pet aversion, the probate judge darkened the doorway. Boston kicked out of an army blanket that he had wrapped around his legs and was struggling to use the old army carbine. I kept the muzzle of the gun pointed toward the ceiling until the probate judge could reach a safe haven in the front end of the train. After this Boston calmed down.

#### **BOSTON VANISHES**

At the Legislature Boston was "joshed" a good deal by members, doorkkeepers and pages. He was humored by permission to carry his trusty carbine to and from the Capitol. Nothing serious happened until some wisecracker said: "Boston, a lot of these members of the Legislature very much doubt you killed John Wilkes Booth. In fact, they think you couldn't hit the side of a barn with that gun."

Bloœy! Boston blew up. He threw his gun down on the assembled lawmakers for a direct shot. Members differed in a humorous analysis of the speed used in reaching safety zones.

For a while Boston was a curious house guest at the State Hospital for the Insane at Topeka. Then he decided on French leave, easily escaping to Texas and then into Mexico. Never again did he claim his pension as a veteran of the Civil War. In fact, his complete effacement is one of the departmental mysteries.

# Camden Preacher Revealed As Lincoln Killer's Killer

*Boston Corbett Shared  
Reward, But Had to  
Face Trial*

## BECAME MINISTER HERE AFTER WAR

BY FRANK SHERIDAN

Boston Corbett, who killed the man who killed Abraham Lincoln became a Camden preacher after the Civil War.

That was brought to light yesterday by Charles S. Boyer, president of the Camden County Historical Society, and by Leonard L. Roray, of Glassboro, former commander of Thomas K. Lee Post, No. 5, G. A. R., and past state commander.

Corbett was a soldier in the Union Army, one of a detachment sent to capture John Wilkes Booth, the actor, who mortally wounded Lincoln in Ford's Theatre, Washington.

His right name was Thomas P. Corbett and he was born in London, England, in 1832. He came to America as a boy and became an itinerant hatmaker. He was converted to religion at Boston and adopted the name of that city in honor of the event.

### Trapped Booth in Barn

He enlisted in Company L, 16th New York Cavalry, in 1863. He served in several engagements during the war and was a prisoner in Andersonville. He was traded in an exchange of pris-



BOSTON CORBETT

oners and was stationed at Washington when Lincoln was shot in April, 1865.

Corbett was ordered with a detachment of 25 men to search for

(Continued on Page Two)

MORNING Post 2-12-32

CAMDEN, N.J.

## Parson Here Slew Lincoln's Assassin

(Continued from Page One)  
Booth. On April 26, 1865, the trail led to Bowling Green, Virginia, near Fredericksburg. Booth was cornered in a barn on a plantation owned by a man named Garrett.

The soldiers surrounded the barn and demanded that Booth and a companion surrender. The actor refused. Corbett asked permission from the commanding officer to get into the barn and bring out Booth but that was refused.

The barn finally was set on fire. Booth's companion surrendered. The assassin remained in the building. As the boards of the barn were eaten away by the flames, Corbett got a glimpse of Booth and shot him with his rifle. Booth died a few hours later on the porch of a farm house.

### Corbett Wins Reward

Corbett was placed under arrest and ordered to stand court-martial because the government had ordered Booth taken alive.

Secretary Stanton reviewed the proceedings and said:

"The rebel is dead. The patriot lives. He has saved the country expense, continued excitement and trouble. Discharge the patriot!"

Corbett received \$3000 reward as his share of \$50,000 offered by the government.

He was mustered out of service in August, 1865, and became a Methodist preacher.

He took charge of a church on the West side of Broadway below Kaighn avenue and lived on Pine street near Fourth street, according to Camden Civil War veterans. He was admitted to the New Jersey Conference.

### Left Here for Kansas

After preaching here until 1878 he went to an old soldier's home at Fort Leavenworth, Kan. He later wandered from the home. He settled in Cloud county, Kansas. In 1887, he was made a doorkeeper of the Kansas House of Representatives. By this time he had become eccentric and when he acted "queer" with the legislators, he was removed from office. He was declared insane Feb. 16, 1887, and taken to the state hospital at Topeka. He escaped on a pony, May 26, 1888, and disappeared. The pony was found at Neodesha, Kansas a week later, after he had written a letter to the superintendent of the hospital.

His friends said he labored under the disillusion that he had been defrauded by the government in dividing the reward for killing Booth. The last heard of him was that he was heading for Mexico in 1888.

### NAB JAG DRIVING SUSPECT

Wanted in Absecon on a charge of drunken driving, William Evans, 45, of 14 North State Street Bridge, was arrested last night by Detective Clifford Carr and Hammonton state troopers. He was taken to Hammonton for arraignment.

## Surratt.

At the Sixth Et. wharf we took the Steam Tug John S. Ide, under Captain Henry Wilson, who conveyed us to Bell Plain, where we landed and at once began the search between the two rivers, Potomac and Rappahannock at Port Conway. The Ferryman recognized two of the Pictures, and said: "Those two men pictures, and said: "Those two men crossed my ferry yesterday." Willie Jett, a Confederate officer, he said aided them on their way, giving Booth a lift on his horse after crossing the river. We followed the clue given, Captured Jett, who was compelled to guide us to the place where he had left the men. Arriving at Garrett's Farm, the Lieutenant said to me, "Booth is in that house, ride through the Command and see that every man's pistol is in readiness for use." I did so and supplied two of our men with Caps for their Revolvers, who were out of caps.

## Statement By Boston Corbett

In camp at Victoria, Virginia, on the morning of April 15, 1865, the news reached us that President Lincoln had been shot the night before. Late news said he was still alive but there was no hope of his recovery. Our Regiment, the 16th N. Y. Cavalry, was immediately ordered out in pursuit of the Assassin. Deployed as skirmishers we advanced down the Potomac River. When near the River we saw the Flag at half mast on one of the forts and we knew our President was dead.

We returned to camp unsuccessful but were soon afterwards sent to Washington to go in any direction required to scout for Booth. Our regiment was soon cut up into detachments, all engaged in the same work under different Leaders. Col. N. B. Switzer Commanding the main body of the men; Major Bosworth another portion of our command. Another party under Command of First Lieutenant Edward P. Doherty with Twenty-six enlisted men. Also accompanied by two Detectives to aid in the Capture. They had Photographs of Booth, Herold, and

On entering the Premises we found the men were no longer in the house but had taken refuge in the Barn. A Surrender was demanded and refused; Booth declaring that he would not be taken alive. After much parleying Herold concluded to surrender and was at once put under guard. The Tobacco barn was fired by Conger, the detective, and Booth could then be seen. A single Pistol shot from a Colt's Revolver brought him down and the capture was effected. A Doctor was sent for, who pronounced the wound fatal. Inside of three hours he was dead. Mr. Conger chose me as an escort, and we started for Belle plain, and he there took Steam for Washington, and before the evening closed the news had flashed over the Wires that Booth had been taken. April 26th, 1865, was the day when God avenged Abraham Lincoln's death.

Our Capture was deposited on the Montauk, at the Navy Yard at Washington. During the interval of our different Scouts I attended Prayer Meeting one night at Wesley Chapel. The leader said, "Brother Corbett, lead us in prayer." I prayed, "O Lord, lay not innocent blood

(Continued on Page 12)

(Continued from Page 9)

to our charge, but bring the guilty speedily to punishment." Afterward when the Assassin lay at my feet, a wounded man, I saw the bullet had taken effect about an inch back of the ear, and I remembered that Mr. Lincoln was wounded about the same part of the head. I said, what a God we serve. I little thought when I offered that prayer a week ago that it would be answered in this way.

BOSTON CORBETT.

Late Sergt. Co. L, 16th N. Y. Cavalry.

(Written at Topeka, Kansas, January 19th, 1887.)

The statement is in Sergt. Corbett's hand writing and we have followed his pofuse capitalization and faulty construction.

Vol 4, # 52  
7-27-1935

## WAS BOOTH KILLED BY CORBETT?

*Compiled by HERBERT WELLS FAY, Custodian Lincoln's Tomb*

1-27-35

As from time to time persons have appeared on the scene claiming that they were J. Wilkes Booth there is a widespread tradition that the man killed twelve days after the tragic event was not Lincoln's assassin.

I have two original documents in my collection that authorities on such matters say cannot be picked up elsewhere for even \$100,000, in fact, no money value can be placed upon such historic treasures. They are a personal letter from Mr. Baker who represented the U. S. secret service in the capture of Booth and the personal statement penned in 1887 by Boston Corbett who killed J. Wilkes Booth. They are as follows:

Lansing, Mich., Dec. 15, 1894.

H. W. Fay, Esq., DeKalb, Ill.

Dear Sir: Your favor of 6th inst. at hand. I send you under another cover one of my combination pictures, with circulars that explain themselves.

The picture of Lincoln is a copy of a photo I obtained in Washington, D. C., just before the assassination. It is a first copy of a negative taken by Alex. Gardner, just before Lee's surrender. I know it is a good one, as I frequently saw the original in those days.

The likeness of Booth is also a copy of one I have in my possession. It has a history and I value it very highly. It was taken from Laura Keene's room the day after the assassination. It was found concealed behind a fancy picture on her mantle. You remember she was under arrest a short time as one of Booth's accomplices, but was soon released as no evidence appeared against her.

This likeness of Booth is said to be best in existence. The copy I have I carried with me while in his pursuit and he was identified by it.

Corbett's likeness was also taken from a negative in Washington. The original

is now in the possession of a comrade and chum of his while in the service. I met him on one of my lecture trips and obtained a copy, the negative of which I have. The central picture is explained by the card on its back.

I was in DeKalb about a year ago. Had I known of your collection of photos, should most certainly have given you a call. I would like to secure a good picture of Mrs. Surratt and her son John.

Very truly yours,  
J. B. Baker.

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way. The Ferryman recognized two of the Pictures, and said: "Those two men crossed my ferry yesterday." Willie Jett, a Confederate officer, he said aided them on their way, giving Booth a lift on his horse after crossing the river. We followed the clue given, captured Jett, who was compelled to guide us to the place where he had left the men. Arriving at Garrett's Farm, the Lieutenant said to me, "Booth is in that house, ride through the Command and see that every man's Pistol is in readiness for use." I did so and supplied two of our men with Caps for their Revolvers, who were out of caps.

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Our Capture was deposited on the Montauk, at the Navy Yard at Washington. During the interval of our different Scouts I attended Prayer Meeting one night at Wesley Chapel. The leader said, "Brother Corbett, lead us in prayer." I prayed, "O Lord, lay not innocent blood to our charge, but bring the guilty Speedily to punishment." Afterward when the Assassin lay at my feet, a wounded man, I saw the bullet had taken effect about an inch back of the ear, and I remembered that Mr. Lincoln was wounded about the same part of the head. I said, what a God we serve. I little thought

when I offered that prayer a week ago that it would be answered in this way.

Boston Corbett,

Late Sergt. Co. L, 16th N. Y. Cavalry.

(Written at Topeka, Kansas, January 19th, 1887.)

The statement is in Sergt. Corbett's hand writing and we have followed his profuse capitalization and faulty construction.

Almost as desirable as these two prized documents is a copy of the first printed statement of Major Rathbone who was in the box with Lincoln.

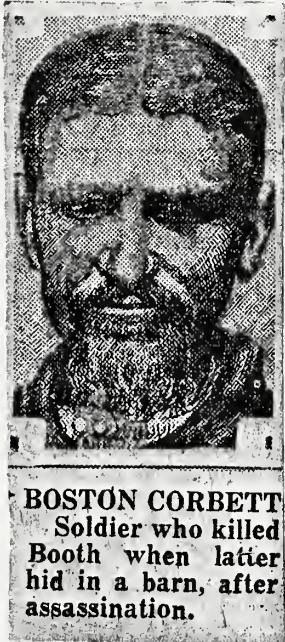
While this documentary evidence that has not been challenged all these years and would satisfy historians generally, yet it does not include the most touching testimony—the last word in the matter.

Booth's aged mother had not seen the body and hoping against fate that some one had been impersonating her beloved and talented son, secured an order from President Johnson to have the body exhumed that she might see for herself. She viewed the remains and claimed the body and buried it in the family lot in an unmarked grave.

She would have given anything to have been able to establish the fact that it was not her child, that would have proved that her son was not the assassin and would have cleared the family name.

How different the history of the later found Booths. There is nothing in the cause except financial expectancy. I talked with the man who embalmed the Enid, Oklahoma, Booth, exhibit 20, and he said that he was not convinced that he was embalming a Booth. A man called upon me a few years ago who said he had Booth's body on a truck down town and if I wanted to see it he would bring it out the next morning. I asked him "which body?", and then showed him the documentary evidence printed above. He did not show up, but left town.

(Reprinted by Request)



**BOSTON CORBETT**  
Soldier who killed  
Booth when latter  
hid in a barn, after  
assassination.

THE MAN WHO SHOT BOOTH

111. (LINCOLN). CORBETT, BOSTON, Sergeant.  
Portrait (in uniform) and his full signature "Sergt.  
Co. L. 16th N. Y. Cav.", ready for framing. RARE.

4.75.

American Antiquarian Corp.  
April 1942

retary of the Treasury I was present at every Cabinet meeting, and I never saw Mr. Lincoln or any of his ministers upon his knees or in tears.

"We were not especially jubilant over Lee's surrender, for this we had been prepared for some days. The time for our great rejoicing was a little earlier. After Gen. Sherman had commenced his celebrated march to the sea, and long and weary days had passed without any reliable reports from him, we were filled with anxiety and apprehension. It was when the news came that he and his army in excellent condition, were in the neighborhood of Charleston, that our joy was irrepressible, not only because of their safety, but because it was an assurance that the days of the Confederacy were nearly ended. With Grant before Richmond, in command of Superior forces, and Sherman with the finest army in the world, ready to move northward, everybody felt that the war must be soon concluded, and that the Union was safe.

"We were, of course, happy when Gen. Lee and his severely tried soldiers, laid down their arms, but this, as I have said, was not unexpected. It was when our anxiety in regard to Sherman, was succeeded by hopefulness and confidence, that our joy became exuberant, but there was no such exhibition of it as has been published by the Advocate."

"Very Truly Yours  
Hugh McCulloch"

As the theme of McCulloch's April 15, 1891 letter did not dwell upon Mr. Lincoln's religion, Remsburg did not incorporate it into his book. Instead he selected from the *Reminiscences of Lincoln*, pages 412-413, McCulloch's statement regarding Lincoln's lack of regard for creeds and dogmas, but the compiler did record the Secretary's contention that "He (Lincoln) was a man of strong religious convictions . . . ."

### William J. Ferguson Saw Booth Shoot Lincoln

New York. June 19, 1914.

Mr. Edward Freiberger.

Dear Sir:

In reply to your letter of June 17<sup>th</sup> asking me what my position was at Ford's Theatre, or in D.C. on the night of the assassination of President Lincoln. I must tell you that it is a subject that is distressing to me to recall; however, I would respectfully state, that, I was Call Boy of that theatre, consequently, the only member of that company now acting. My post of duty was at the prompter's box, opposite and in full view of the President's Box. I saw the occurrence, many done the curtain for the last time.

Sincerely Yours

W. J. Ferguson

In 1930 the Houghton Mifflin Company, Cambridge, Massachusetts, published one thousand copies of a book titled *I Saw Booth Shoot Lincoln*, by the actor, W. J. Ferguson. The work is amply illustrated, and the narrative of the assassination is dramatically reported by the one-time Call Boy.

A letter written by Ferguson from New York on June 19, 1914, addressed to Mr. Edward Freiberger, has found its way into the Foundation's collection:

Dear Sir:

In reply to your letter of June 17th asking me what my position was at Ford's Theatre, Washington, D.C. on the night of the assassination of President Lincoln, I must tell you that it is a subject that is distressing to me to recall; however, I would respectfully state, that, I was Call Boy of that theatre, consequently, the only member of that company now acting. My post of duty was at the prompter's Box, opposite and in full view of the President's Box. I saw the occurrence,

rang down the curtain for the last time.

Sincerely yours  
Wm. J. Ferguson

### "Boston" Corbett

About ten years ago the director of the Lincoln Library-Museum purchased from a book catalogue a manuscript account of Thomas "Boston" Corbett, who allegedly shot John Wilkes Booth on April 26, 1865. Writing with a pencil, five years after the affair (1870), an unknown Philadelphia *Sunday World* correspondent described Corbett as living in "a little old forlorn-looking house at Camden, New Jersey" and proceeded to quote his conversation and to describe his appearance. Corbett was one of the mysterious figures of the Lincoln assassination story, and his ultimate end remains to this day a mystery.

The correspondent's penciled notes follow:

Boston Corbett who shot Wilkes Booth, lives in a little old forlorn-looking house at 328 Pine St., Camden N.J., where he has been visited by a correspondent of the Philadelphia *Sunday World*. This writer describes Corbett as short in stature, with a resolute and rather stern face. He is about forty years old, is very plain in dress and his principal boast appears to be his devotion as a Methodist. He busily plys his trade as a hatter. He lives alone in his little house, doing his own cooking and housekeeping, and seeing nobody but members of the little flock of Methodists, which meet nightly at his house and of which he is the head. Heaped together in a corner of his kitchen are half a dozen rough benches for the use of his congregation. He preaches and exhorts himself and uses a Windsor chair for a pulpit. When asked if the name "Boston" was not a nickname he became rather angry, and his eyes flashed, and holding on high a Testament with the name "Boston Corbett" printed on it in black ink he said, pointing his finger at the name, "Young man, there is my name; the only one I shall ever own. In Boston I was converted; there met my Redeemer, and Boston is the only name I wish to be called by."

As he accompanied his visitor to the gate he said, "On that eventful morning of my life, as I shot the assassin crouched like a savage beast in the recesses of the barn, I felt that I was doing my duty to my God and my country. To this day I feel justified in my course. Were the ghosts of twenty assassins to rise against me, they could not disturb a calm Christian Spirit."



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

Thomas "Boston" Corbett

This fanatic was alleged to have shot Lincoln's assassin.



# THE Manhattan Mutual LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY

POST OFFICE BOX 8 • PHONE PR 6-9465

MANHATTAN, KANSAS 66502

July 20, 1967

Dr. R. G. McMurtry, Editor  
Lincoln Lore  
Lincoln National Life Insurance Co.  
Fort Wayne, Indiana

Dear Dr. McMurtry:

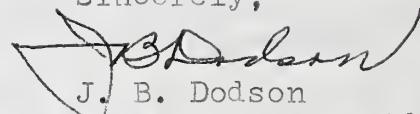
I enjoy very much the articles in "Lincoln Lore" each time and wish to express my appreciation for being included on your mailing list.

The last issue, No. 1553, contained a small but interesting article on "Boston" Corbett, the alledged killer of John Wilkes Booth, and brought to mind other information I had read about this fanatic and his erratic behavior.

After considerable searching, I finally located the article in the Seventeenth Biennial Report of the Kansas State Historical Society and have made a copy of it. While you probably already have this bit of sidelight on "Boston" Corbet in your files - just in case you don't, I am enclosing a copy herewith.

Thanks, again, for being included on your mailing list.

Sincerely,

  
J. B. Dodson  
Agency Vice President

JBD:s  
Enc.

of George Washington, together with the garden, grounds," etc. The property was sold to the Mount Vernon Association April 6, 1858, for the sum of \$200,000, raised by subscription, though another statement says that the purchase money was not paid over until Washington's birthday, 1859. In March, 1860, the ladies of the association, including the regents of twenty-one states, accompanied by senators and members of Congress, made a trip to Mount Vernon to consider the task of restoration, to change the place "from what it is to what it was." But there was not much doing from 1859 until into the '70's. During the Civil War the place was surrounded by Federal or Confederate soldiers. It is said that the soldiers of both armies always stacked their arms outside the grounds before entering, and that during the war only one act of desecration occurred. In 1876 the association made Mrs. Jennie Meeker Ward regent for the state of Kansas. In the plan of parcelling out the work among the states, Mrs. Ward assumed for Kansas the task of restoring the old slave quarters. In December, 1888, she made an appeal to the school children of Kansas for \$1000, to be raised by a penny collection to be taken on Washington's birthday, February 22, 1889. The first contribution came from district No. 8, Dorrance, Russell county; the first city to respond was Fort Scott, with 1409 names; and the largest contribution received was from Kansas City, Kan. Very interesting evidences of enthusiasm and patriotism came from all quarters; the most isolated districts, containing but ten or twelve scholars, sent in their pennies, and many a remote farm home sent a dime or a nickel. In the final summary there were 349 districts in 66 counties which contributed 21,325 names, netting \$1000. Governors George T. Anthony, John P. St. John and John A. Martin were much interested in the work, and aided largely. In May following, a contract was made to rebuild the slave quarters, and by October 1, 1889, the building, seventy feet long by twenty feet wide, was completed. There were enough old bricks to build one of the end walls, and on this end was inserted a tablet, "Restored by the schools of Kansas." How significant that the children of the public schools of Kansas should save the slave pen!

Mrs. Ward died at Ottawa July 15, 1910. She was the wife of Prof. Milan L. Ward, who came to Kansas in 1859, and for all these years has been identified with the educational interests of the state, with the Agricultural College at Manhattan, and the Baptist University at Ottawa. Mrs. Ward was born at Northfields, N. J., and was married to Professor Ward in 1858. She was made a regent of the Mount Vernon Association in 1876, and for a while was national secretary. She was a daughter of the American Revolution, prominent in the Colonial Dames, and gave much time to W. C. T. U. work. The first work done in Kansas for the Mount Vernon Association was an entertainment by the students of the Agricultural College at Manhattan, February 22, 1876, under direction of professor Ward, by which fifty dollars was raised.

A month before her death Mrs. Ward placed with the Historical Society her scrapbook concerning the work of the Mount Vernon Association.

The state seal has been repainted, the carving cleaned and oiled, and it is now a very attractive feature of the historical museum.

 BOSTON CORBETT ADJOURS THE KANSAS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.

We are indebted to Geo. A. Huron, of Topeka, guardian of Boston Corbett, for the military belt worn by Corbett as a soldier at the time of the killing of John Wilkes Booth and at the adjournment by him of the Kansas legislature, together with the cartridges Corbett had in reserve at the time of said adjournment, which interesting historical relics are deposited with the Society for safe-keeping. We are indebted to Judge Huron also for the following account of this incident in Kansas history.

Time was when Boston Corbett held a large place in the public eye. As the slayer of John Wilkes Booth he was the avenger of Abraham Lincoln, so far as the ancient doctrine, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," could avenge the cowardly assassination of the first martyr President.

Boston Corbett was born in London, England, in 1832. His trade was the manufacture of silk hats. He was a soldier during the Civil War and on August 17, 1865, was mustered out as a sergeant of company L, Sixteenth New York cavalry. He then obtained employment in a silk hat factory in Philadelphia, Pa., but made his home in Camden, N. J.

Soon after the close of the war he was admitted to the Methodist Conference of New Jersey on trial as a preacher, and was assigned to a mission church in Camden, where he continued to be the pastor until he came west in 1878. He arrived in Kansas during the fall of that year, and finally settled in Cloud county, where he took a homestead. He was a religious zealot and continued to preach with a considerable degree of acceptability while following the avocation of a farmer. Upon the organization of the legislature in January, 1887, he was nominated by Hon. Geo. W. Knapp, representative from his district, and was elected assistant doorkeeper in the house of representatives. During all his residence in Kansas Corbett had been very erratic. He was a dead shot and quick on trigger with a revolver or rifle. The eighty acres of land that he had taken as a homestead was very rough and stony. Not more than twenty acres of the tract could be cultivated, but Corbett thought the land a very "Garden of Eden" and was so jealous of his rights as its owner that he would not permit his neighbors to come upon it without first obtaining permission from him. So jealous was he of his prerogatives that, although his land was not enclosed with a fence, if a neighbor started to walk across it Corbett would take his rifle and shoot so that the bullet would strike a stone or the ground immediately in his neighbor's front. He would then give the command "About face and march off this farm." It is claimed that no one ever failed to immediately obey orders.

As assistant doorkeeper he was also very jealous of his rights. This resulted in frequent unpleasantnesses with the other officers of the house. He had also followed his religious inclinations with great zeal, so that he became a very active member of the Salvation Army in Topeka. While on duty in the house he wore the same United States army belt that he had worn while a soldier and at the time of the death of Booth. Upon this belt he carried a .38-caliber revolver, and kept on his person his well-worn pocket Bible; both of these weapons he used in persuading the people to obey the rules of order. Constituted as he was, it is not

strange that the few grains of patience stored in his anatomy should be finally exhausted, which condition was reached in the forenoon of February 15, 1887. On this morning Corbett had been assigned to duty in the ladies' gallery of the house of representatives. On his way to his post he suddenly confronted two of the doorkeepers with a .38-caliber revolver and threatened to shoot them. Knowing his reputation as a dead shot and crank of the thirty-third degree, they did not stand upon the order of their going, but went, Corbett lending them wings by pursuing with the revolver pointed at their heads. Major Norton, sergeant-at-arms, thought to investigate, but Corbett, bringing his gun to bear, informed the officer that if he came another step rays of sunlight would shine clear through his anatomy. Pressing business instantly called the sergeant-at-arms to other posts of duty. A newspaper reporter thought to corral the fleeting item by diplomacy, but Corbett mistook him for an exhibitor of gall and turned his gun upon the young man, with such emphasis in his threat to shoot that he left with all speed for pastures that promised harvests of news items with less risk. Mr. Conrad, member of the house from Nemaha county, passed that way, when Corbett thrust the gun in his face, and exclaimed, "Mr. Speaker, you can discharge me, but you can't scare me." Conrad did not tarry for explanations, but as he ran, disclaimed all title to the speaker's chair. By this time the speaker, Hon. A. W. Smith, of McPherson county, believing that Corbett would adjourn the house without ceremony unless something was done quick, sent a hurry call for the police. A platoon of officers, with Chief John W. Gardiner in command, responded on the double quick. Arriving at the capitol, a council of war was held, whereupon Chief Gardiner with a couple of assistants made his way around to the back door of Corbett's reservation. A part of the police force had been placed at the door from the anteroom into the hall of the house with instruction to keep Corbett's attention constantly drawn toward them, which was done by opening the door and closing it so quickly that Corbett could not drop a bullet in the opening. Arriving at the ladies' gallery, Gardiner and his assistants opened the door so quietly and advanced so stealthily that the first hint to Corbett of his presence was when Gardiner clasped him around the waist with such force as to pinion his arms and hands to his side while the other men disarmed him. Corbett was taken before the probate court the next day, where he was adjudged insane and committed to the insane asylum at Topeka. Here his condition and conduct were variable. At times he gave way to fits of anger in which he promised dire vengeance upon all whom he imagined had contributed to his being there. At other times he was not only docile, but took a lively interest in the work planned for the pleasure of the patients and the betterment of conditions.

Thus passed the time until the morning of May 26, 1888. On this morning about a hundred patients, with best mental balance, under the guidance of an attendant, were enjoying a walk through the beautiful grounds, when a Topeka boy, riding a smart Indian pony, dismounted, tied his pony to a post and went into the headquarters office. Apparently none of the patients noticed either boy or pony, but it was remembered afterward that Boston Corbett, who was well at the front,

began to loiter, to examine and admire flowers and plants until, when the rear of the procession came opposite the pony, he was the rear man by several steps. The attendant in charge was a hundred yards away, moving forward with the front of the procession, giving no heed to whether his charges were meekly following like Little Boy Blue's sheep, or were doing something else. It was not unusual during such walks for a patient to express the exuberance of his spirits by giving vent to a yell, so that when one, two, a dozen yells were given, the attendant took no notice. In fact, he pursued his quiet way until his patients broke into a mob, and when he turned all were yelling, gesticulating wildly and pointing and looking toward the south. Turning his eyes in that direction the attendant saw Corbett a half mile away, whipping that pony at every jump with the rawhide whip the boy had left hanging to the saddle, while to all appearance the only reason that the pony was running was because he couldn't fly. Just there was a turn in the road, and Corbett, looking back and seeing no pursuers, swung his straw hat the full length of his good right arm around his head, and thus waved a final farewell to the hospital and the crowd of his late companions.

This was the last seen of Boston Corbett by any Kansas officer. Both mail and telegraph were used, north, south, east and west, with no tidings until a week had passed, when Doctor Eastman, superintendent of the hospital, received a letter from a livery stable keeper of Neodesha, Kan., telling that the pony that Corbett had ridden from Topeka was safe in his stable, subject to the order and charges of the owner.

Later investigation developed that Richard Thatcher, then principal of the Neodesha city schools, had been a fellow prisoner and bosom friend of Corbett for months during the Civil War, in Andersonville prison pen.

This is the last reliable information of Boston Corbett. Arrived at Neodesha both pony and man were exhausted. Corbett rested two nights and a day. He was deeply grieved that he, the avenger of President Lincoln, should have been confined in an insane hospital in the United States. To his disordered mind the government had committed an unpardonable sin against him, and so, on the second morning after his arrival, he told Mr. Thatcher that he was going to "shake the dust of the United States from his feet" and was going to Mexico. What became of him is not known. Geo. A. Huron, of Topeka, had been appointed his guardian. Numerous rumors of Corbett's death were brought to Judge Huron, all of which he investigated, with the same result; they were all found to be without foundation.

In 1898 Judge Huron got into correspondence with a man who claimed to be the genuine Boston Corbett, who was traveling over the cattle ranges of Texas, trapping wolves and peddling patent medicines for a living. The correspondence was continued for years, during which time Judge Huron became satisfied that the claims of the trapper were genuine, and so applied to the Pension Department to have Boston Corbett restored to the pension roll. Afterward the conduct of the claimant was such as to excite suspicion that something was wrong, whereupon, by direction of the probate judge of Shawnee county, Judge Huron and John W. Gardiner went to the wilds of Texas, seventy-five miles from a rail-

road, and, instead of finding Boston Corbett—a man past seventy years of age, only five feet, four inches high—they found a fellow less than fifty years of age, big, rawboned and six feet tall.

Upon their return Judge Huron made full report to the pension office, but the pretender continued to urge his claim, whereupon he was indicted in the United States court at Abilene, Tex., October 2, 1905; was tried in the United States district court at San Angelo, Tex., October 16, 1905; was found guilty and sentenced to pay a fine of \$100 and to be confined three years at hard labor in the penitentiary at Atlanta, Ga.

The pretender served his sentence, was released two years ago, and he too has dropped out of sight.

**GUARDED THE LINCOLN CONSPIRATORS.**

A very interesting souvenir of war times was brought to us during the last week in October, 1910, when the Fifth Kansas cavalry had their reunion in Topeka. William Henry Atkerson (whose name in the Kansas adjutant general's report is misspelled Alkerson) contributed to our museum the gun, belt and cartridge box he used while a member of company E, sixth United States veteran volunteers. That which gives interest to these relics is the fact that while Mr. Atkerson was a member of Hancock's corps he was stationed at Washington, D. C., and his company (company E, sixth United States veteran volunteers) was assigned the duty of guarding the Lincoln conspirators—Mrs. Mary E. Surratt, Edward Spangler, Samuel Arnold, George A. Atzerodt, David E. Herold, Samuel A. Mudd, Michael O'Laughlin, Lewis Payne—during the trial, and during the execution of Mrs. Surratt, Lewis Payne, David Herold and G. A. Atzerodt. He also used it while standing guard over Capt. Henry Wirz, commandant of Andersonville prison; whose trial was held at Washington, D. C., commencing August 23, 1865, and who was hung by order of the President between ten and eleven o'clock, November 10, 1865, in the capitol military prison. He was also stationed at Alexandria, Va., for a short time during the winter of 1865, guarding church property, and preventing rioting between sympathizers of the North and South Methodist Episcopal Churches.

Mr. Atkerson was born near Gallatin, Sumner county, Tennessee, October 15, 1843. His father was a native of Virginia. The family moved to Simpson county, Kentucky. In 1854 they moved to Upshur county, Texas, and in 1855 to Lawrence county, Missouri. At the outbreak of the Civil War his political views compelled him to move again, this time to Coles county, Illinois. The son, William Henry, headed for Kansas, and at Mound City, November 11, 1861, enlisted in company I, third Kansas cavalry, under Col. James Montgomery. This company later became company D of the Fifth Kansas cavalry. Atkerson campaigned three years in Arkansas and Missouri. He was transferred to company H August 6, 1864, and mustered out at Leavenworth December 8, 1864. All told, he had but ninety days of schooling, and so he returned to Coles county and began attendance at school, but the war was still on and the quiet life of a private citizen was too much for him, and at Jacksonville, Ill., April 4, 1865, he reënlisted, in company E, Sixth United States veteran volunteers. This organization was stationed a

part of the time at Washington, and here he did guard duty as above stated. He was discharged April 4, 1866. He purchased a farm near Noble, Okla., where he has resided since August 2, 1892.

This very practical gift will connect Mr. Atkerson for all time with one of the most important incidents in the history of his country. He expresses great pride in the fact that these relics are now in the care of the state of Kansas.

**THE MEMBERSHIP FEE FUND.**

We have reached a very gratifying status in the condition of our membership fund. The life list now numbers 122 and the active 259. June 30, 1908, there was a shortage in our contingent fund of \$307, which required the money from membership fees to meet the demands



GEORGE LEVI LOWER,  
Born October 12, 1902. Son  
of William Sherman Lower  
and Mary Walsh Lower;  
grandson of Mrs. Elizabeth  
A. Johnson.



DONALD FERGUSON MARTIN,  
Born February 19, 1909. Son  
of Lincoln Martin and Mary  
Ferguson Martin.

Clinton David Ballard,  
Born August 10, 1898. Son  
of Frank C. Ballard and  
Mary A. Ballard; grandson  
of Hon. David E. Ballard.

Three Juvenile Life Members of the Kansas State Historical Society.  
There are now six, including one young lady.

*X*

*Property of Another Owner*

105

LINCOLN, ABRAHAM. Autograph Note signed ("A. Lincoln"), 1 page small square (probably removed from a larger leaf), [Washington], 7 September 1864, asking the commissioner for the exchange of prisoners of war: "Will Gen. [Ethan Allen] Hitchcock see & hear this good lady Mrs. Ten Eyck?"; small ink smear on one character of date; matted and framed with a sketch of Lincoln based on a Brady photograph

\$1,800-2,200

*Property of Lawrence C. Affron*

106

LINCOLN, ABRAHAM. Document signed, 1 1/4 pages folio, Washington, 17 December 1864, being a pardon for David S. Everett, countersigned by Secretary of State Seward; paper seal intact; tape repair to horizontal fold on page 2 (verso of page 1); mounted with a green moiré mat; in a massive double-sided wooden frame, mounted on a wooden stand to which are attached (recto) a descriptive label and (verso) an applied metal profile bust of Lincoln

CHRISTMAS PARDON FOR A JUVENILE OFFENDER. While many Lincoln pardons cite the offender's "extreme youth" as a ground for clemency, that phrase has special meaning in this case. David Everett was only twelve years old when he stole letters from boxes in the Providence, R.I., Post Office. Under existing statutes, the prosecutor, jury, and judge had no choice but to convict the boy, even though the judge took care to give him only the minimum sentence of two years for his crime.

Even as he pronounced the sentence at the November 1863 term of the Rhode Island Circuit Court, Justice Nathan Clifford expressed "... his regret at the time that there was no reformatory institution in the State, to which children of his age could be sent" (David S. Everett pardon file, National Archives: Record Group 204, Case File A-572). As it was, there was no choice but to send the boy to the State Jail at Providence.

A move to reduce or reverse the sentence began almost as soon as the boy was sent to jail, but it was apparently understood that a better case could be made if the boy served at least part of his sentence before applying for federal clemency. Thus, on 21 November 1864, Samuel Blaisdell, the Providence Jailer, signed a statement on the first anniversary of the boy's incarceration. Everett, Blaisdell deposed, had "... conducted himself with propriety during the year that he has been in my custody" (same).

The next day, Wingate Hayes, the U.S. Attorney who had prosecuted the case, wrote to Judge Clifford to tell him that "the friends of David E. [sic] Everett ... inform me that they propose to apply to the President for a pardon. . . In view of all the circumstances of the case," Hayes suggested to the justice, "I am disposed to recommend granting of a pardon, if your honor

should concur with me in so doing." Clifford immediately added a note of concurrence to Hayes's letter, and Everett's friends proceeded with their formal petition to the President, which bore twenty-five signatures. Hayes's letter (with Clifford's addition) and the petition went to Washington with this hearty endorsement by Gov. James Youngs Smith: "I most cheerfully endorse the enclosed petition as one worthy of your favorable consideration" (same). The issue of Everett's continued imprisonment was a nonpartisan issue: Judge Clifford was a convinced Jacksonian Democrat, while Gov. Youngs, a man well known for his personal philanthropy and charity, was a firm Republican.

Even with the pressures of war, the fate of a frightened boy in the Providence Jail seemed to strike a responsive chord every where. The petition from Providence and its accompanying documents reached Lincoln's office on 27 November and was immediately referred to the Attorney General's office. On 14 December, M.F. Pleasants, the department's Pardon Clerk, reported to Attorney General Speed that he "... cheerfully concur[red] in the recommendation . . ." for pardon that came from the federal court officers in Rhode Island. On Saturday, 17 December, Lincoln signs the formally copied document that will give the boy his freedom, citing the appeals from "... the United States District Attorney who prosecuted the said Everett, and . . . the Judge who pronounced his sentence . . ." that the boy's age and "good conduct in prison" be taken into consideration.

In this pardon, Lincoln affirms that Everett is "... a proper subject for the exercise of Executive clemency . . .," granting him "a full and unconditional pardon." Lincoln and Seward may well have taken a special pleasure in signing this pardon on 17 December, offering Everett and his family one of the few Christmas gifts in the power of the Executive branch of the federal government.

\$10,000-15,000

*Property of Various Owners*

107

LINCOLN, ABRAHAM. ASSASSINATION.]  
★ CORBETT, BOSTON. Autograph Letter signed, 4 pages small 4to, Lincoln Barracks, Washington, D.C., 13 May 1865, to "Dear Brother Eddy"; lightly browned, soil and wear at folds on page 4, some tiny holes at interesections of folds

THE MAN WHO SHOT JOHN WILKES BOOTH. When Lieut. Edward Doherty of the 16th New York Cavalry called for volunteers at Lincoln Barracks in Washington, D.C., Sergeant Boston Corbett (b. 1832) is supposed to have been the first to step forward for the party that would track down John Wilkes Booth. Contradictory legends and self-serving testimony surround almost everything concerning that party's expedition beyond the Rappahannock River in pursuit of Lincoln's assassin, but there is no doubt about Corbett's role at the end of their hunt on 26 April 1865.

*continued*

When Booth was cornered in the barn at Richard Garrett's farm, Corbett was in the band that surrounded the wood structure. On Booth's refusal to come out, the barn was set on fire. According to Corbett, he saw Booth move to a vantage point where he could have turned his carbine on either Corbett or Doherty. Convinced that he was acting in self-defense, Corbett disobeyed explicit orders and fired at Booth. The array of rewards offered to anyone playing a part in apprehending Booth inspired instant disagreement among witnesses. While most assumed that Corbett's shot had felled Booth, others argued that Corbett's marksmanship was inadequate and that Booth must have shot himself. In the absence of modern ballistics tests, the question remains open. (And, as Corbett's letter offered here reveals, one piece of evidence that would have made such a test possible disappeared within weeks of the incident.)

Corbett believed that he had killed Booth, and he believed just as firmly that God had guided his trigger finger and the bullet. Corbett's life was ruled by his evangelical Christian fervor. Born Thomas P. Corbett, he adopted the name "Boston" when he received adult baptism in that city, arguing that Christ had renamed all of his disciples at their baptisms. Personal tragedy—the death of his wife and child—plunged the young hatter into alcoholism, and Corbett was rescued from a life of drink and saved for God by a band of churchpeople in the slums of New York City in the mid 1850s.

In the letter offered here, Corbett writes less than three weeks after Booth's death brought him instant celebrity. His correspondent, "Brother Eddy," is an old friend and fellow churchman, probably from the Troy-Albany, N.Y., area where Corbett had been raised. Eddy had written to congratulate him on his exploit. It is clear that the two have been out of touch for some time, for Corbett must first bring his friend up to date on his wartime career: ". . . I Enlisted first in the 12th NY State Militia for 3 Months service. And afterwards served two more short terms in the same Regt, and when that was over I enlisted for 3 Years in the Cavalry Service of which I have now served nearly two years. . ." He skips over details, saying only: "I have fought the Rebels more than once and the last and hardest fight I had with them previous to shooting Booth, was on the 24th of June last [at Culpeper, Va.], I faced and fought against a Whole Column of them."

"All alone," he recalls of that terrifying day, "none but God being with me to help me My being in a large field and They being in the Road with a high fence between us enabled me to hold out against them as long as I did. . . They finally had the fence torn down and then Closed around me And when my Pistol gave out giving no more fire I was captured by them, And sent to Andersonville Georgia."

"There," he boasts, "God was good to me sparing my life while only another and myself lived to return out of 14 men who were there of my Own Company." And there was additional cause for rejoicing, for many men had found God amid the horrors of Andersonville: "But Bless the Lord a Score of Souls were Converted right on the spot where I lay for 3 months without any Shelter. And hundreds were converted in that place for Mass Meetings were held in different parts of the Bull Pen. . ."

He continues with the story of his exchange in November after five months as a prisoner-of-war: "After being in the Hospital at Annapolis awhile I had a Furlough home for 30 days And then Returned to duty with my Regt, I am still with it and do not know how long I may have to stay. As I did not get my Discharge from the Secretary of War which I asked for after Shooting Booth."

With obvious relish, he describes his celebrity status: "The Fair of the Sanitary Commission coming off on the 30th at Chicago will have a life Size Picture of me I expect on Exhibition. They wrote for it and the Revolver with which Booth was Shot But that has been Stolen from me since And I have only another in place of it. . ."

And he closes with a complaint that, as yet, he has no earthly rewards to show for his deed: "I have not yet received any part of the Reward. As the Trial [of Booth's accused conspirators] is occupying all the Attention of the Authorities who have the matter in hand." This remarkable and revealing letter concluded, he signs as "Your Old friend and Brother in Christ"

Corbett eventually received a share of the reward money. By the late 1870s, he was in Kansas, homesteading and preaching. In the years that followed, dozens of men claiming to be Corbett appeared and vanished, each adding to his legend by their misadventures and escapades.

\$8,000-12,000

□ 108

MADISON, JAMES, as *Fourth President*. Document signed, 1 page 4to small folio oblong on vellum, Washington, 16 January 1816, being the appointment of Thomas D. Anderson of Pennsylvania as U.S. consul in Tunis, countersigned by Secretary of State James Monroe; with original paper seal; scattered stains, soil (heavier in margins), small pinhole paper losses at folds (affecting portions of two characters of text); heavier soil and staining on verso

\$750-1,000

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TUESDAY, OCTOBER 31, 1989



# Abe Lincoln's Jack Ruby

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By Jane Raymond Walpole

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John Kennedy, Lee Harvey Oswald, Jack Ruby and the CIA? No—Abraham Lincoln, John Wilkes Booth, Edwin Stanton and Boston Corbett. Lincoln and Booth are known to all. Stanton was Lincoln's secretary of war. But who was Boston Corbett?

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Since no one doubts that Ruby shot Oswald, why the doubts that Corbett shot Booth? For one thing, Ruby pulled his trigger on national television and in plain sight of police. No one saw Corbett fire—though at least 10 men were close by. And then there was his defiance of orders . . . and the bullet's odd trajectory . . . and the nonexistent revolver . . . and the reward money. And, of course, Corbett himself.

Thomas Corbett seemed normal enough, living with his young wife in New York City. But her unexpected death drove him to the bottle and to vagrancy, until one night in Boston a band of evangelists offered him salvation. He accepted, and the event transformed his life. He changed his given name to Boston, let his hair grow in flowing tresses, castrated himself to lessen the temptation of sin and traveled the Eastern seaboard as an itinerant preacher.

In Richmond, Corbett was revolted by the sight of slave auctions. When the Civil War began, he quickly enlisted in the army, determined to punish slavery by killing sinful Southerners. His sermons to fellow soldiers soon gained him the derisive title of the "Glory-to-God Man," but he was equally fanatical in shooting rebels.

Captured in May 1864, Corbett was sent to the hellhole of Andersonville; in November, body and mind sapped by the brutal conditions, he was exchanged and, in March, he was mustered out. But with Gen. U. S. Grant's final offensive straining the manpower pool, he volunteered for active duty with a promotion from private to sergeant. Boston Corbett was about to burst into the headlines.

**A**fter Booth shot Lincoln at Ford's Theater on April 14, 1865, he disappeared, fleeing through Maryland and hiding in a swamp. On April 23, Stanton and Col. Lafayette Baker, head of the Army Detective Bureau, learned that Booth had crossed the Potomac and was headed toward Richmond. A cavalry unit was scratched together and placed under Baker's cousin, Lt. Luther Baker, with orders to take Booth alive, if possible. Once more, Sgt. Corbett volunteered.

Early on April 26, the ragtag troop surprised Booth in a tobacco shed on a



SGT. BOSTON CORBETT FROM CRACKED GLASS PLATE IN BRADY-HANDY COLLECTION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

farm just west of Port Royal, Va. When Booth refused to surrender, the barn was surrounded and set afire. Suddenly a shot rang out. Booth lurched from the blazing barn and collapsed, a revolver in his hand and a bullet in his neck. Within two hours Booth died, never having regained full consciousness.

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The other men snickered. But Conger, who already doubted Corbett's mental stability, relaxed. Clearly Booth had committed suicide. Conger rode off to Stanton with the news. But Baker wanted a scapegoat, and Corbett had admitted to disobeying orders. He gratefully arrested the sergeant, packed up Booth's body and returned to Washington.

The day after Conger had reported to Stanton, Baker and his unrepentant sergeant were called to the secretary's office. Corbett entered a prisoner and emerged a hero. "The rebel is dead. The patriot lives," proclaimed Stanton.

And now Lincoln's avenger had his moment of fame. Newspapers around the world vied for interviews. Cards bearing his photograph sold by the thousands. He moved to a Washington hotel to be closer to reporters and admirers and farther from jeering soldiers in camp.

Conger was not alone in discounting Corbett's claim. None of the troopers at the flaming barn believed his story. No one had seen him aim at Booth or had heard a shot from outside the shed. And the shot itself would have needed a fantastic trajectory. As he defiantly rejected Baker's surrender demand, Booth was standing at the barn door with his left shoulder facing Corbett 20 yards away. But the bullet had struck Booth in the right side of the neck, angling downward and backward. Corbett shrugged off any doubters: "It wasn't strange—God directed that bullet."

And what about the gun that fired the bullet? According to the autopsy report, Booth was killed by a "conoidal pistol ball," the kind used in revolvers. Booth had two revolvers in the barn; whether either had recently been fired and whether Booth had powder burns

around his wound are not recorded. Corbett, on the other hand, had been issued a carbine; only the officers carried revolvers. Yet Stanton, after reading the autopsy report, sent a memo to the Army's chief of ordnance stating that Corbett had lost his Colt revolver and should be issued a replacement.

Possibly Boston Corbett had found an unauthorized revolver and did use it to kill Booth. Possibly he did believe that God had chosen him to strike down Lincoln's assassin. And possibly he wanted the \$75,000 reward. He pressed his case before the Committee on Claims but received only the \$1,653.85 awarded to each of the 26 troopers. To the unimpressed committee members, Corbett was merely "that insane man."

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Maybe Stanton hoped that Booth's death would quiet the nation. Maybe he wanted to plant the idea that Booth was part of a large Confederate conspiracy, thus justifying harsh retribution against the South. In either case, Booth couldn't be allowed the honor of suicide. Far better that Sgt. Corbett had shot him.

Or perhaps Stanton feared that a talkative Booth could implicate the secretary himself in Lincoln's death; circumstances had fueled such suspicions almost immediately. Stanton strongly disagreed with Lincoln's desire to welcome the South back into the Union with minimum penalties, and Vice President Andrew Johnson of Tennessee would prove as lenient. But if Booth's band of conspirators had succeeded in killing Johnson and Secretary of State William Seward as well as Lincoln that April 14, Stanton would have had substantially more influence over the course of Reconstruction. As it happened, the plans went awry and Johnson and Seward survived. But this did not stop Stanton from taking temporary charge of the government—and the hunt for Booth.

Then there is the ease with which Booth rode out of Washington through a military checkpoint. And Booth's pocket diary, supposedly intact when Baker turned it over to Stanton but missing more than a dozen pages when Stanton gave it back—pages dated shortly before and after April 14. And the papers burned by Robert Todd Lincoln some 50 years after his father's death, papers that he reportedly stated contained evidence of treason in his father's cabinet. Suppositions all—the truth will never be known.

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But the myth of Boston Corbett remains—the myth of an officially sanctioned hero and patriot, a myth no one can truly believe or totally disprove.

# The Myth of Lincoln's 'Jack Ruby'

BY JANE RAYMOND WALPOLE

**T**he president had been shot. His killer was caught, then gunned down in plain view of his captors. 6/7/92

People wondered how this could have happened. They puzzled over a bullet that changed course in mid-flight. They whispered about high officials perhaps implicated in the assassination plot. The suspicions grew because there were no answers and probably never would be.

John Kennedy, Lee Harvey Oswald, Jack Ruby and the CIA?

No — Abraham Lincoln, John Wilkes Booth, Edwin Stanton and Boston Corbett. Lincoln and Booth are known to all. Stanton was Lincoln's secretary of war. But who was Boston Corbett?

Known by his admirers as "Lincoln's Avenger" and by his detractors as the "Glory-to-God Man," Boston Corbett was the acting first sergeant of the cavalry detachment sent out to capture Booth. His professed shooting of Booth led to wild acclaim by Stanton, the press and the public — and to angry giles that he was a religious fanatic and a liar.

Since no one doubts that Ruby shot Oswald, why do doubts that Corbett shot Booth? For one thing, Ruby pulled his trigger in plain sight of police and TV cameras. No one saw Corbett fire — though at least 10 men were close by. And then there was his defiance of orders... and the bullet's odd trajectory... and the nonexistent revolver... and the reward money. And, of course, Corbett himself.

Thomas Corbett seemed normal enough, living with his young wife in New York City. But his unexpected death drove him to the bottle and to vagrancy, until one night in Boston a band of evangelists offered him salvation. He accepted, and the event transformed his life. He changed his given name to Boston, let his hair grow in flowing tresses, castrated himself to lessen the temptation of sin and traveled the East ern seaboard as a preacher.

In Richmond, Corbett was revolted by the sight of slave auctions. When the Civil War began, he quickly enlisted in the army, determined to punish slavery by killing sinful Southerners. His sermons to fellow soldiers soon gained him the derisive title of the "Glory-to-God Man," but he was equally fanatical in shooting rebels.

Captured in May 1864, Corbett was sent to the hellhole of Andersonville; in November, body and mind sapped by the brutal conditions, he was exchanged and, in March, he was mustered out. But with Grant's final offensive straining the manpower pool, he volunteered for active duty with a promotion from private to sergeant.

After Booth shot Lincoln at Ford's Theater on April 14, 1865, he disappeared, fleeing through Maryland and hiding in a swamp. On April 23, Stanton and Colonel Lafayette Baker, head of the Army Detective Bureau, learned that Booth had crossed the Potomac and was headed toward Richmond. A cavalry unit was scratch together and placed



Boston Corbett (right) is credited with killing Lincoln-assassin John Wilkes Booth (above), but evidence runs against it

under Baker's cousin, Lieutenant Luther Baker, with orders to take Booth alive, if possible. Once more, Corbett volunteered.

Early on April 26, the ragtag troop surprised Booth in a tobacco shed on a farm just west of Port Royal, Va. When Booth refused to surrender, the barn was surrounded and set afire. Suddenly a shot rang out. Booth lurched from the blazing barn and collapsed, a revolver in his hand and a bullet in his neck. Within two hours Booth died.

Baker, upset at not taking Booth alive, was certain someone had disobeyed orders and shot the assassin. Everton Conger, an experienced detective who had been sent along to advise Baker, sized up the situation as suicide. But to placate Baker, Conger asked each of the 26 men in the troop if he had shot Booth. There were 25 denials. Then Corbett responded, "Yes sir, I shot him." Conger, taken aback, asked the sergeant why he had disobeyed orders. Gazing heavenward, Corbett replied, "Providence directed me."

The other men snickered. But Conger, who already doubted Corbett's mental stability, relaxed. Clearly Booth had committed suicide. Conger rode off to Stanton with the news. But Baker wanted a scapegoat, and Corbett had admittedly disobeyed orders. He gratefully assisted the sergeant, packed up Booth's body and returned to Washington.

The day after Conger had reported to Stanton, Baker and his unrepentant sergeant were called to the secretary's office. Corbett entered a prisoner and emerged a hero. "The rebel is dead. The patriot lives," proclaimed Stanton.

And now Lincoln's avenger had his moment of fame. Newspapers around the world vied for interviews. Cards bearing his photograph sold by the thousands. He moved to a Washington hotel to be closer to reporters and admirers and farther from jeering soldiers in camp.

Conger was not alone in discounting Corbett's claim. None of the troopers at the flaming barn believed his story. No one had seen him aim at Booth or had heard a shot from outside the shed. And the shot itself would have needed a fantastic trajectory.

As he defiantly rejected Baker's



surrender demand, Booth was standing at the barn door with his left shoulder facing Corbett 20 yards away. But the bullet had struck Booth in the right side of the neck, angling downward and backward. Corbett shrugged off any doubts: "It wasn't strange — God directed that bullet."

And what about the gun that fired the bullet? According to the autopsy report, Booth was killed by a "conoidal pistol ball," the kind used in revolvers. Booth had two

revolvers in the barn; whether either had recently been fired and whether Booth had powder burns around his wound are not recorded.

Corbett, on the other hand, had been issued a carbine; only the officers carried revolvers. Yet Stanton, after reading the autopsy report, sent a memo to the Army's chief of ordnance stating that Corbett had lost his Colt revolver and should be issued a replacement.

Possibly Corbett had found an unauthorized revolver and did use it to kill Booth. Possibly he did believe that God had chosen him to strike down Lincoln's assassin. And possibly he wanted the \$75,000 reward. He pressed his case before the Committee on Claims but received only the \$1,653.85 awarded to each of the 26 troopers.

The truth will never be known. Corbett, the hero proved a nine-day wonder. He left the army, but had trouble adjusting to civilian life. After receiving several threats signed "Booth's Avenger," he moved to Kansas, where he tried his hand at farming. The Kansas legislature, recognizing Corbett's one-time fame, appointed him sergeant-at-arms.

One day, taking umbrage at horseplay by idle page boys, he sprayed the Senate chamber with bullets — and was sent back to the farm. His uncertain mind finally snapped, and in 1887 he was committed to an asylum. A year later he escaped, headed toward Mexico and vanished.

But the myth of Boston Corbett remains — the myth of an officially sanctioned hero and patriot, a myth that no one can truly believe or totally disprove.

Washington Post

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# The Man Who Shot the Man Who Shot Lincoln

*The hatter Boston Corbett was celebrated as a hero for killing John Wilkes Booth. Fame and fortune did not follow, but madness did.*

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ERNEST B. FURGURSON

*For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb; and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men; and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.*

—MATTHEW 19:12

One morning in September 1878, a tired traveler, five feet four inches tall, with a wispy beard, arrived at the office of the daily *Pittsburgh Leader*. His vest and coat were a faded purple, and his previously black pants were gray with age and wear. As he stepped inside, he lifted a once fashionable silk hat to disclose brown hair parted down the middle like a woman's. Despite the mileage that showed in his face and clothes, he was well kept, and spoke with clarity. He handed the editor a note from an agent at the Pittsburgh rail depot, which said: "This will introduce to you Mr. Boston Corbett, of Camden, N.J., the avenger of Abraham Lincoln. Mr. Corbett is rather bashful, but at my solicitation he concluded to call on the *Leader* editor as an old soldier."

The newspaperman realized that this was no joke. He remembered the photographs of this man, spread across the North after he shot the assassin John Wilkes Booth 13 years earlier, in April 1865. He invited him to sit and talk. Corbett told him that he was homeless, almost penniless, and headed to Kansas to stake a claim. The railroad agent had suggested that he come to the newspaper to tell his story, on the chance that someone would help him on his way.

Asked what had happened since he entered history by shooting Booth that early morning in Virginia, Corbett said that despite his fame, he had

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Ernest B. Furgurson's most recent book is *Freedom Rising: Washington in the Civil War*.

nothing. The photographer Mathew Brady had taken his portrait, and published it by the thousands, but all the hero got in return was a few copies. He had worked at his trade of hat finisher in New York, then lived in Camden while employed in Philadelphia. He showed the editor his credentials as a guard at the great Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876. Now his luck had run out. He lost his job in Philadelphia and could not find work, so decided to head for wide-open Kansas, determined to get there if he had to walk. So far he had paid \$4.21 for rail fare, but had come on foot much of the way to Pittsburgh. That morning he had sought out the local manager of the Pennsylvania Railroad, without success. He was going back that afternoon.

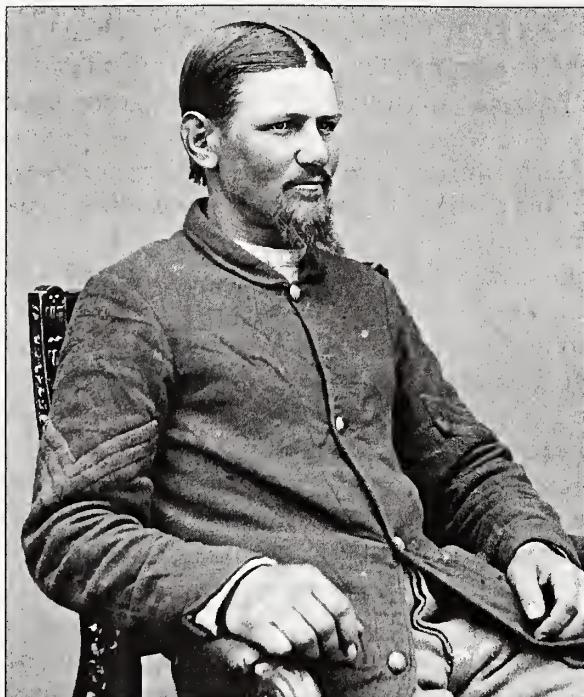
The editor of the *Leader* did not say how long they talked, or record how much Corbett told him about his earlier life. But Corbett was always willing to tell how he got his name:

Born in London in 1832, he came to America with his family when he was seven. They settled in Troy, New York, where he learned the hat trade, soon becoming a journeyman and taking his skills to other cities around the East. The beaver hats then so much in style were made of animal furs matted and repeatedly washed in a solution containing mercury nitrate, a process called carroting because it turned the fur a distinct shade of orange. Hat finishers like Corbett labored in close quarters, inhaling vapors laden with mercury. A year after he married, his young wife died with their still-born daughter. He was despondent, and began wandering, working by day and drinking by night. Adrift in Boston, he underwent a born-again experience inspired by a Salvation Army evangelist. He felt a calling. It shook his life so profoundly that he decided to change his name to honor the place where he first saw the light, as Christ had changed the names of Saul and Simon when he called them. Since then Corbett's first name had been not Thomas, but Boston.

There was much more to his story: In Boston, he let his hair grow long in imitation of Jesus, became a street-corner preacher, and harangued his fellow workers for cursing and wenching. But the streets were still full of sin, and he was young, only 26, and lonesome. One night in July, two women mocked him and beckoned him down from his soapbox. He was tempted. Fearful that he could not resist such strumpets, he went to his room, took a pair of scissors, and carefully castrated himself. Then he proceeded to a prayer meeting, had dinner, and took a walk before seeking emergency aid at Massachusetts General Hospital.

In his own mind, he had done as the Bible said: he had made himself a eunuch "for the kingdom of heaven's sake." He said years later that he felt divinely instructed; he wanted to "preach the gospel without being tormented by animal passions." The grisly experience may have removed him from sexual temptation, but the rest of his life proves that it did not remove his manhood.

After weeks recovering, he moved to New York and became a loud and constant presence at the Fulton Street Meeting, a lunchtime prayer gathering in lower Manhattan organized by the Young Men's Christian Association. He was too fervent for his co-worshipers, who called him a fanatic. When he testified or led prayers, he added an emphatic "er" to his words, saying "Lord-er hear-er our prayer-er." In his loud shrill voice, he shouted "Amen" and "Glory to God!" to approve anything he liked. Those around him tried to shush him, but failed.



*Corbett sat for Mathew Brady after shooting Booth, but not everyone in Washington considered him a hero.*

Corbett was living in this emotional fever when war came in 1861, and he enlisted in the 12th New York Volunteers two days before the regiment sailed for Washington. He was eager to get at the Rebels: "I will say to them, 'God have mercy on your souls' —then pop them off." Morning and night, he prayed in the corner of his tent, despite the jeers of rough fellow soldiers. His resistance to military authority, to any authority below that of Christ, got him into the guardhouse, and sometimes had him

marching back and forth with a knapsack full of bricks. Even then he kept his Bible in hand, ranting at his comrades for their sins.

He was not afraid of the highest brass; in parade formation in Washington's Franklin Square, when colonel and future general Daniel Butterfield cursed the regiment for misbehavior, Corbett stepped forth and defied him to his face. He was punished, but not repressed. He announced that he would quit the army when his first hitch was up, no matter what. When the hour came, he was on picket duty, but laid down his weapon and marched off. A court martial fined him two months' pay, yet he kept reenlisting. The 12th New York Volunteers were among the 12,500 Union troops captured, then paroled by Stonewall Jackson's Confederates at Harper's Ferry just before the battle of Antietam in September 1862. The following year, Corbett switched to Company L of the 16th New York Cavalry, a regiment that spent much of its time chasing John Mosby's Con-

federate raiders on the outskirts of Washington.

By mid-1864, U. S. Grant had marched the great Federal army from its winter camps along the Rapidan River to the suburbs of Richmond, a hundred miles south of the Union capital. But behind the lines, Mosby's partisan horsemen still harassed Federal outposts and communications, striking and then disappearing into the northern Virginia countryside, tying down many times their own numbers and keeping Washington on edge.

That June, Mosby's riders surprised Corbett and a detachment from Company L who were looking for them near Centreville. Official records say the Union troopers were loafing about after a meal and unprepared when the Rebels struck; Corbett's version was: "I faced and fought against a whole column of them, all alone, none but

God being with me, to help me, my being in a large field and they being in the road." *Harper's Weekly* would make him a hero, reporting that the Yankee cavalrymen "were hemmed in . . . and nearly all compelled to surrender except Corbett, who stood out manfully, and fired his revolver and 12 shots from his breech-loading rifle before surrendering, which he did after firing his last round of ammunition. Mosby, in admiration of the bravery displayed by Corbett, ordered his men not to shoot him, and received his surrender with other expressions of admiration."

*"JOHN MOSBY, in admiration of Corbett's bravery, ordered his men not to shoot him."*

....

But when Corbett was out of Mosby's hands, he got what turned into a death sentence to thousands of other captives—he was sent first to Lynchburg, then to the pine woods of Georgia, into the hellhole of Andersonville prison. Soldiers of both sides suffered in prison camps North and South, but Andersonville was the worst of the horrible lot. Although it existed for barely a year, about 45,000 captured Union troops were sent there, and of these nearly 13,000 died of disease, malnutrition, and exposure to the elements. Corbett endured, preaching, praying, and comforting his fellow inmates. "Bless the Lord," he said later, "a score of souls were converted, right on the spot where I lay for three months without any shelter."

After the war, he would testify for the prosecution in the long-running trial of Captain Henry Wirz, commandant of the camp, the only Confederate soldier executed for war crimes. Corbett told of seeing prisoners dragging ball and chain in the sun; he said the place "was in a horrible condition of filth"; the swamp around the stream that flowed through the stockade "was so offensive and the stench so great that he wondered that every man there did not die; the maggots were a foot deep"; prisoners dug roots and dried them to eat; men who carried the dead out to be buried were allowed to bring back firewood, only to hear taunts of "That's

right; sell off a dead man for wood!" from fellow sufferers. When Corbett himself was sent out to gather firewood, he managed to slip away, but within hours was tracked down by hounds and brought back.

Then, after Corbett had been held for five months, General Grant allowed the resumption of prisoner exchanges. Because Corbett was suffering with scurvy, diarrhea, and fever, he was among the emaciated but lucky hundreds sent back north, a skeleton on crutches. Of 13 other Yankees captured with him, only one survived.

Corbett stayed in an Annapolis hospital three weeks, until he was strong enough to take 30 days' leave. He had reason to be deeply vengeful as he

rejoined his regiment at Vienna, Virginia, 10 miles west of Washington. Writing to a woman who had tended soldiers returning from Andersonville, he said the thousands of their comrades lying under Georgia soil were "monuments of the cruelty and wickedness of this Rebellion—the head of all the rebellions of earth for blackness and horror. Those only can feel the extent of it who have seen their comrades, as I have, lying in the

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large crack in the barn."*

....

broiling sun, without shelter, with swollen feet and parched skin, in filth and dirt, suffering as I believe no people ever suffered before in the world."

On April 15, the morning after John Wilkes Booth shot Lincoln at Ford's Theatre, the 16th New York deployed into a cordon thrown about Washington in hopes of snaring the attacker before he could escape to the South. The troopers did not realize the president had died until they approached the capital and saw flags at half-mast. The regiment split into detachments that rode out to follow every rumor of Booth's whereabouts. Between these sorties, Corbett was asked to lead prayer one night at Washington's Wesley Chapel. "O Lord," he intoned, "lay not innocent blood to our charge; but bring the guilty speedily to punishment." The regiment had the honor of riding in the president's funeral procession on April 19, a solemn procession along Pennsylvania Avenue between thousands of mourning citizens and buildings draped in black.

For another five days, Corbett and his detachment continued their vigil until a bugle sounded "Boots and Saddles" and brought them running to their stable. They mounted up, and with Lieutenant Edward Doherty leading, they clattered to the office of Lafayette C. Baker, chief of War Department detectives, across from Willard's Hotel at 14th and Pennsylvania. Doherty went in, emerged with two other detectives, and rushed with 26 cavalrymen to the Sixth Street wharf to board the steamer *John S. Ide*. They set

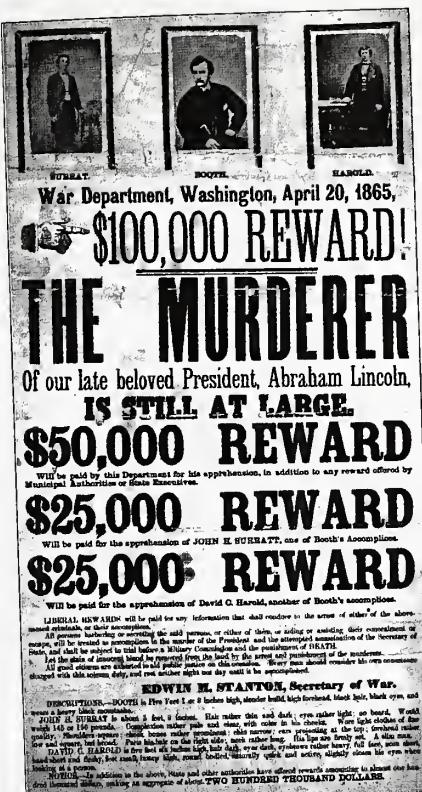
*The Man Who Shot the Man Who Shot Lincoln*

out down the Potomac toward Fredericksburg in pursuit of the assassin.

Booth and David Herold, one of his accomplices, had escaped into southern Maryland, where they hid at Dr. Samuel Mudd's house, then in swamps and barns until they borrowed a rowboat and slipped across the wide Potomac into Virginia. Following a tip, Doherty's troopers came ashore at Belle Plain on Aquia Creek at about 10 o'clock that Monday evening and spread across the country, rapping farmers out of bed for questioning. The next day they tracked Booth to the Rappahannock River, and they shuttled over it on a rude scow that carried eight men and horses at a time. That night they traced him to the Garrett farm, just west of Port Royal. After a detective threatened the reluctant Garrett with hanging, the farmer's son pointed to the barn where the fugitives were hiding. That is where Corbett picked up the story three weeks later, when he testified before the military court trying the remaining conspirators.

He told how the soldiers surrounded the barn, and Lieutenant Doherty and the detectives carried on a long back-and-forth conversation with Booth, trying to persuade him to give up. "He positively declared he would not surrender, saying, 'Well, my brave boys, you can prepare a stretcher for me. . . . Make quick work of it; shoot me through the heart.'" But Booth said his accomplice wanted to come out, so Herold emerged and was quickly searched and tied up. Immediately after that, detective Everton J. Conger set fire to hay in the barn.

Corbett said, "The position in which I stood left me in front of a large crack—you might put your hand through it, and I knew that Booth could distinguish me and others through these cracks in the barn, and could pick us off if he chose to do so." He could have shot Booth easily, but "as long as he was there, making no demonstration to hurt any one, I did not shoot him, but kept my eye on him steadily." Then he saw Booth "taking aim with the carbine, but at whom I could not say. My mind was upon him attentively to see that he did no harm, and when I became impressed that it was time that I shot him, I took steady aim on my arm, and shot him through a large crack in the barn."



A wanted poster featuring John Wilkes Booth in the center photo

When Booth's body arrived at the Washington Navy Yard, Corbett was immediately proclaimed a hero by the public. He sat for photographer Brady, in several poses alone and in one standing with Doherty. The newly promoted

captain towers over him, but Corbett stands at ease with his forage cap tilted over his eyes, his pistol holster huge on one hip, his other hand grasping his saber, his boots tall and polished. His cavalry brothers found him, this strange little sergeant, "cheerful and heroic under circumstances of intense suffering and great provocation."

But Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, detective chief Baker, and others were not interested in Corbett as hero; they were furious that he had shot Booth before he could be captured. They wanted the assassin alive, to question him and to conduct a show trial, trying to prove that the conspiracy involved Confederate President Jefferson Davis, who had not yet been caught. Some



*Sgt. Boston Corbett with the newly promoted Captain Doherty in a Mathew Brady photograph*

charged that Corbett had acted against orders, others that he fired without orders. He insisted that he pulled the trigger only when he saw the assassin raise his carbine.

On the scene, Corbett had explained simply that "Providence directed my hand." Days later, he wrote a letter, published by *The New York Times*, refuting "many false reports in the papers charging me with violation of order, &c." Lieutenant Doherty had cleared him of blame, he said, and commended him to General Grant for his action. Corbett wrote that "when I saw where the ball had struck him—in the neck, near the ear—it seemed to me that God had directed it, for apparently it was just where he had shot the President."

Corbett was offered one of Booth's pistols as a keepsake, but declined it. When someone offered him \$100 for the pistol with which he had shot

Booth, he also declined, saying it belonged to the government. But if the government wished to reward him, he said, it might let him keep his little horse. It was not worth much, but he had become attached to it after riding it through so much history.

The Committee on Claims conducted more than a year of hearings before deciding to award Lafayette Baker and the detective, ex-colonel Conger, \$17,500 each from the \$75,000 reward posted by the Federal government. That generated so much public protest that the committee's report was disapproved. But after it was revised, the biggest single share still went to Conger, while the enlisted cavalrymen who chased Booth down, including the sergeant who shot him, got precisely \$1,653.85 each.

That did not sustain Corbett long; by some accounts, he was robbed of his share soon after he got it. He returned to New York, back at the downtown prayer meetings where he had spoken before the war. He preached temperance to shipyard workers, and ventured onto the lecture circuit. But that career fizzled because his advertised lectures invariably turned out to be raging sermons instead. In 1869 he found work as a hatter in Philadelphia and became pastor of a Methodist mission across the Delaware River in Camden. Stacked in one corner of his kitchen there, he kept half-a-dozen rough benches for use by the worshipers who came to hear his nightly sermons. When a reporter asked him about John Wilkes Booth, he said: "I felt I was doing my duty to my God and my country. To this day I feel justified in my course. Were the ghosts of 20 assassins to arise against me, they could not disturb a calm Christian spirit."

Corbett was Christian, but not calm. Losing his job was not the only reason he left Philadelphia and headed west. He was not pursued by the ghosts of 20 assassins, but he had received threatening letters; he suspected that he was targeted by Confederate sympathizers bent on revenge. He stayed briefly with an ex-comrade in Company L, who wrote that Corbett had "been driven from pillar to post," that "he preaches with a pistol in his pocket," that "after he says his prayers he lies down at night with a loaded revolver under his pillow," that "he moans pitifully" in his sleep. "It almost seems my house was haunted while he was there."

Although Corbett was "a good man, a pure and devout Christian of spotless life," his friend went on, "I declare I was glad when he was gone, he was so unhappy, so uneasy, so strange. He is no lunatic. He is no fool. He is a good man in every way. But wherever he goes he says Nemesis pursues him, and the troubled spirits of revenge will not let him rest. He is in constant fear of assassins."

Corbett made it to Cloud County, Kansas, and homesteaded 80 acres on seemingly worthless land 18 miles southeast of Concordia. He was convinced that admirers of Booth had created a secret order sworn to avenge him. He built himself a sod and stone dugout, with holes in the walls so he could fire out at interlopers. He lived as a recluse, wandering the coun-

try-side on his cherished little black horse Billy. A friend said he always had a "watchful, wary countenance . . . he always seemed to be on the lookout for something."

Often when he saw someone approaching, he dismounted, drew his pistol and lay waiting in the grass until he saw who it was. He was a deadly marksman—one Kansan alleged that he had seen him bring down a barn swallow with his pistol. Neighbors said he fired warning shots if they happened to ride across the borders of his claim. Such behavior brought him

*A REPORTER SAID that the "bloody deed, which so effectually blighted his life . . . has finally followed him into a straight-jacket."*

....

before a hearing in Concordia, where he whipped out his gun and shouted "Lie, lie, lie!" But because it was Corbett, the authorities sent him back to his shanty with just a warning. He was active with the local Salvation Army, and a friendly judge tried to help him by arranging lectures, but as before he drove audiences away with his "shouting, ranting, street preacher religion—'Repent and ye shall be saved!'" A Presbyterian minister invited him to

talk about his war experiences, and Corbett took the occasion seriously, even buying a new coat and shirt. But what he delivered was another shouted "disconnected exhortation."

Other war veterans sympathized with Corbett; an old cavalryman and legislator arranged a job for him as a doorkeeper in the Kansas House of Representatives at Topeka. This worked out for a few months, but each day his piety was offended by the doings of the prairie politicians around him. Eventually, on February 15, 1887, he could stand it no more. Just after the morning prayer, he drew his pistol and threatened the speaker of the House, abruptly adjourning the legislature. He kept the floor, waving his weapon and threatening legislators, reporters, and staff. There are many versions of exactly what provoked him; one says he was disrespected by the House staff, another that he exploded when he heard pages mocking the opening prayer. As he raged, lawmakers hid under desks and spectators scattered; he held the floor until police crept up behind him, grabbed his pistol, and took him away.

After long testimony, a probation judge in Topeka declared Corbett "hopelessly insane" and committed him to the state asylum. A reporter recalled his shooting of Booth, and said sadly that the "bloody deed, which so effectually blighted his life . . . has finally followed him into a straight-jacket."

Sadly, but not finally: Occasionally Corbett threw fits of anger at the asylum, but at other times he was a model patient and was allowed to join his fellow inmates in outdoor exercises. But on May 26, 1888, when a friend of

the superintendent's son came visiting and tied his "smart Indian pony" near the gate, the old cavalryman saw his chance. Dawdling behind his group, pretending to admire the spring blossoms, he leaped into the saddle and galloped away. The patients he left behind shouted excitedly, but this was not unusual at the asylum, so at first attendants did not realize what had happened. They spotted Corbett when he was half a mile down the road, "whipping that pony at every jump" with the rawhide whip the boy had left hanging on the saddle. "To all appearance the only reason that pony was running was because he couldn't fly," said a witness. "At a turn in the road, Corbett looked back and swung his straw hat around his head, and thus waved farewell to the hospital and his late companions." A few days later, a letter came saying the horse could be reclaimed at Neodesha, Kansas, 75 miles south. Corbett had spent two nights there with an old soldier who had suffered with him at Andersonville. He borrowed train fare, covering it with a draft on the \$15 he had left in a Concordia bank. Then he departed, saying he was headed for Mexico.

What happened to him after that is not known, but widely rumored. Every few months some newspaper out west reported that he had appeared in a neighboring county, or was working in the gold fields of Nevada, or had died in a Minnesota forest fire. In 1900, a Topeka patent medicine magnate said a certain John Corbett had been peddling his products up and down Texas and Oklahoma for several years, always being careful not to step over the Kansas line. He was convinced that this Corbett was really Boston. But among other discrepancies, this Corbett stood six feet and weighed 188 pounds; after extensive interviews and depositions, he was convicted of perjury in trying to collect Boston's abandoned property and \$1,300 in accumulated government pension. In 1913, after chasing rumors for a quarter century, state officials concluded that "it is safe to say that no one in Kansas knows the whereabouts of Boston Corbett." In 1958, Boy Scouts erected a stone monument on Corbett's homestead, decorated with a plaque and a pair of big pistols.

The phrase "mad as a hatter" was already familiar more than 150 years ago; it had appeared in Edinburgh's *Blackwood Magazine* in 1829, and Thackeray used it in *Pendennis* in 1850, when Corbett was learning the hat trade at which he worked for two decades or more. Through the years, doctors began to recognize the poisonous side effects of the mercury used in many medical treatments and in industrial procedures. Among the victims' symptoms they listed irritability, nervousness, fits of anger, anxiety, insomnia, low self-control, exaggerated response to stimulation, fearfulness, and violent behavior. The worst damage to humans came from mercury made airborne into tiny droplets and breathed into the lungs—exactly what had happened to Boston Corbett.

On December 1, 1941, the U.S. Public Health Service banned the mercury process in hat making. ♦

How Computers Brought Down Wall Street *by* Joseph Fuller

# The AMERICAN SCHOLAR

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THE YEAR OF DARWIN

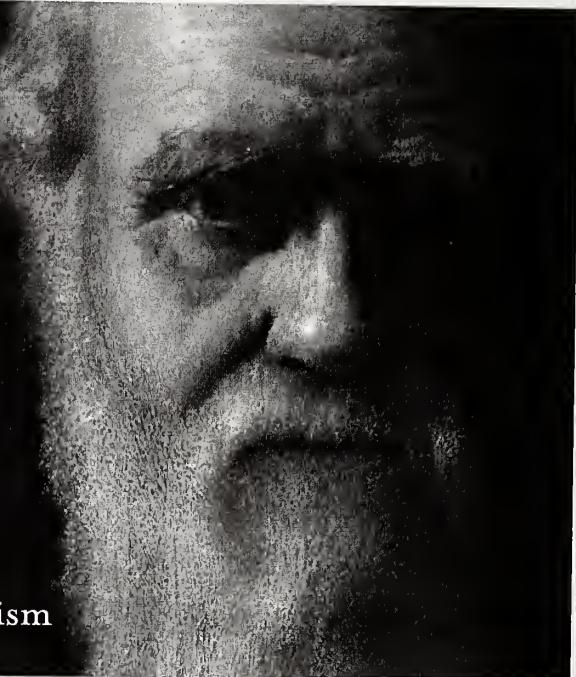
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INSANE MAN ESCAPED.

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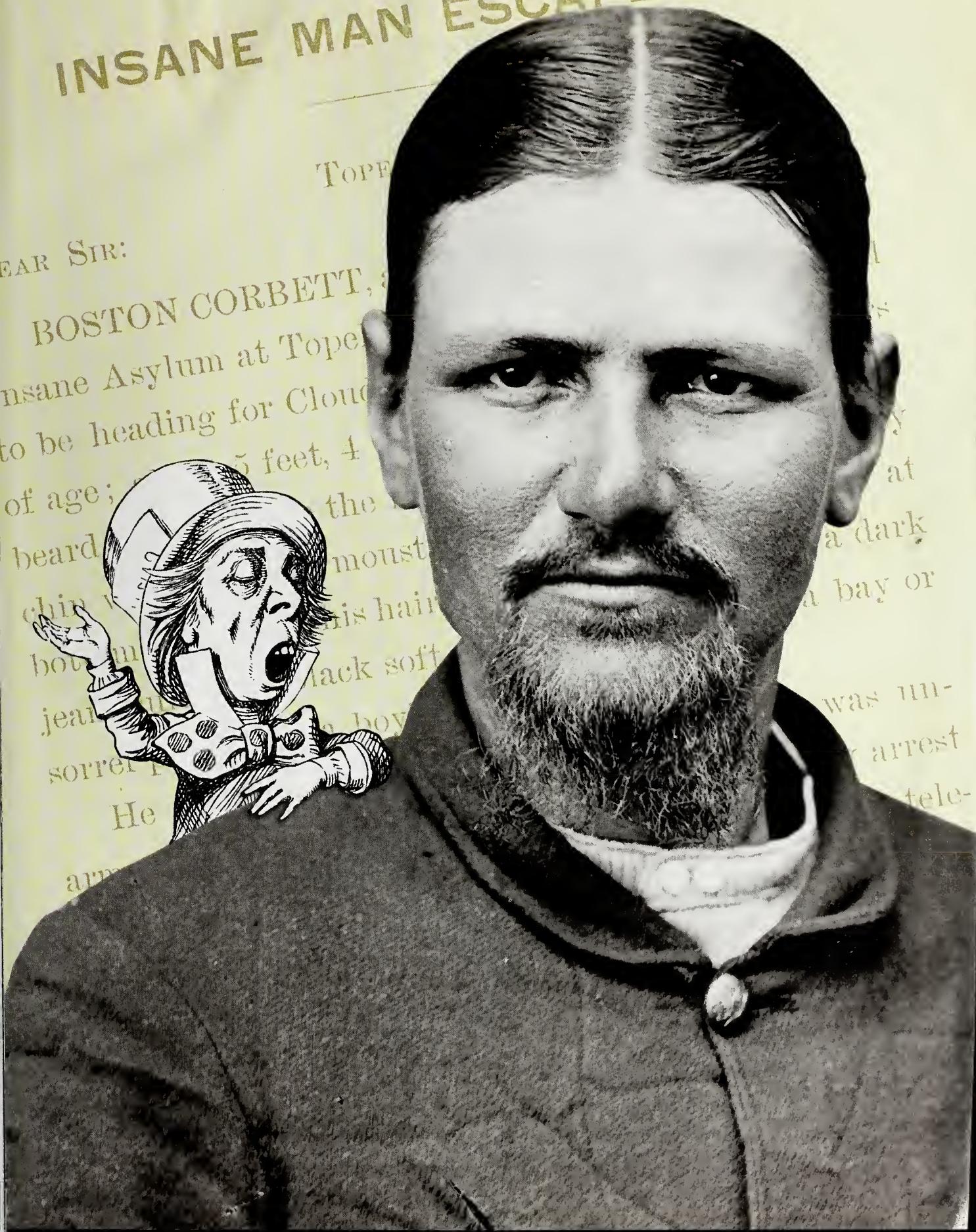
BOSTON CORBETT,  
at Topeka

BOSTON  
Insane Asylum at Topeka  
is heading for Cloudland

5 feet, 4

An illustration of a man with a very large head and a small body. He has a worried expression, with one eye closed and the other looking directly at the viewer. He is wearing a bow tie with a polka-dot pattern. The background is filled with text from Lewis Carroll's 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland', including 'of age', 'the', 'beard', 'moust', 'chin', 'his hair', 'black soft', 'jean', 'a boy', and 'sorrel'.

He



# Mad as a Hatter

**John Wilkes Booth's killer achieved instant fame—but folks soon realized he was just plain crazy** By Eric Niderost

**J**ohn Wilkes Booth grimaced in agony as he staggered around inside a tobacco barn near Port Royal, Virginia, on April 26, 1865. His accomplice, David Herold, had already surrendered to troopers of the 16th New York Cavalry surrounding the barn, but the handsome actor who had shot President Abraham Lincoln at Ford's Theatre 12 days earlier refused to give up despite the pain of a fractured leg. For Booth and his pursuers, it was a desperate moment.

Detectives Luther Baker and Everton Conger, accompanying the 16th NY, wanted to set fire to the barn to smoke out the assassin. But 1st Lt. Edward Doherty, commander of the New York detachment, was reluctant to do so, preferring to rush the barn in the morning. Then a small, wiry sergeant known as Boston Corbett came to Doherty and asked if he could enter the barn alone. The lieutenant refused, and Conger went ahead with his plan, setting fire to some hay piled against the barn's rear. Even after flames

engulfed the structure, Booth still refused to come out.

Watching him through a crack, the sergeant noticed that Booth seemed to be limping toward a door. Corbett later testified that he saw Booth aiming his carbine.

**A wartime photo of "Boston" Corbett, with a flyer advertising his escape from a Kansas mental institution in May 1888.**

"My mind was upon him attentively," Corbett insisted, "to see that he did no harm....I took steady aim on my arm, and shot him through a large crack in the barn." Booth pitched over, mortally wounded in the neck. He died two hours later.

Corbett's steady aim would transform him into a celebrity—the man who had rid the world of Lincoln's assassin. In the weeks that followed, the sergeant drew admiring crowds wherever he went. It quickly became apparent, however, that there was something odd about the Union cavalryman. Instead of signing his name when asked for his autograph, Corbett often penned lengthy passages about the Almighty. And while at first he modestly claimed that he was just a soldier doing his job during Booth's pursuit, Corbett began telling people that God had made him "the agent of His swift retribution on the assassin of our beloved President, Abraham Lincoln."

His strange behavior became more noticeable when he discovered the downside of his new celebrity. Many people worshipped him, but he also encountered detractors. Crank letters began arriving, some of them from Booth admirers. The volume of hate mail increased, occasionally accompanied by death threats. Corbett's fears eventually blossomed into full-blown paranoia, and he took to pointing his gun at autograph seekers. More of his admirers began falling away as unsavory facts emerged about Lincoln's avenger.

## Drunken Hatter Mends His Ways

Thomas Corbett had been born in London in 1832, but his family emigrated to New York City when he was 7. He grew up there, becoming a hat-maker. Soon after he

**‘Feeling guilty that two prostitutes had inspired lust in him, Corbett got a pair of scissors and calmly cut an opening on his scrotum, pulled out the testes and cut them off’**

married, his wife died during childbirth along with their infant. Devastated, he moved to Boston and began drinking heavily. One night the drunken hatter encountered a street preacher whose message apparently filtered into his befuddled brain, instantly transforming him into a religious zealot. Corbett grew his hair long, in imitation of Jesus, and thereafter called himself “Boston,” after the city where he had been converted.

His newfound religious fervor quickly flowered into full-blown fanaticism. He upset fellow Methodists with his loud shouts of “Glory to God!” He also adopted some bizarre affectations—adding “er” to all his words in prayers and supplications, for example. “Oh Lord-er,” Corbett would yell, “Hear-er our prayer-er!”

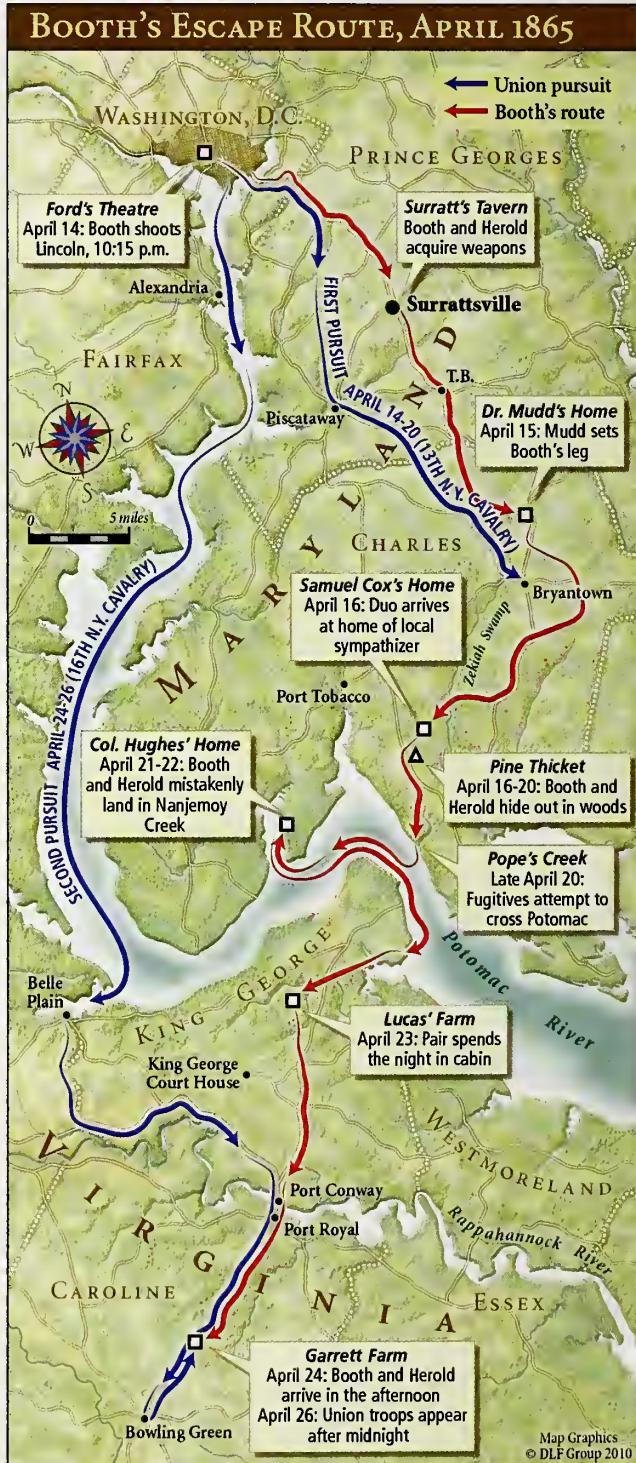
The young hatter’s zeal reached new heights on the night of July 16, 1858, after he spied two prostitutes walking down the street. Feeling guilty that they inspired lust in him, he returned home and read Mark 19:12, which quotes Christ as saying “they have made themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of God’s sake.” That was all Corbett needed to see. He got a pair of scissors and calmly cut an opening on his scrotum, pulled out the testes and cut them off. Unfazed, he then attended a prayer meeting and took a walk before having a hearty meal.

By the time Corbett finally sought medical help, an enormous amount of blood had collected in the swollen, blackened scrotum. The doctor drained the wound, and within a few weeks the hatter had fully recovered.

Corbett now became a part-time preacher, roaming the Boston dockyards and sermonizing burly Irish stevedores and longshoremen. Many let him know that they resented his advice. When one angry Irishman knocked him off his impromptu “pulpit” Corbett was unfazed. “You may bring all Ireland with you,” he exclaimed, “and it won’t frighten me in the least.” By this time he was having trouble holding down a job. He insisted his employers must be what he considered “godly” at all times, and he would stop working whenever he heard any cursing, then fall to his knees and pray for the offender.

### Eunuch Joins the Union Army

When the Civil War broke out, Corbett was faced with a decision: Should he become a pacifist, or join the Union





**A contemporary engraving shows Corbett shooting Booth through a crack in the burning barn while other troopers capture David Herold.**

Army? After much prayer, he chose to become a soldier, fighting for what he had decided was the Union's righteous cause against the traitorous South. But he would follow a formula whenever he fired on the enemy—he'd first say, "God have mercy on your souls."

Nor surprisingly, Corbett was in hot water almost from the first day he joined the army. He became his regiment's self-appointed moral guardian. During a review, for example, when the colonel roundly cursed the men as they stood at attention, Corbett stepped out of the ranks to reprimand his commanding officer. He spent some time in the guardhouse after that.

Another infraction nearly got the former hatter executed. When he abandoned his post one night, insisting that his enlistment was up at midnight, the army disagreed. He was quickly arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced to be shot. For a time his life hung in the balance, but in the end the Army simply expelled him.

Corbett didn't stay a civilian for long, however, next enlisting as a trooper in the 16th New York Cavalry. He got his first real chance at combat in 1864, when his unit

had a brush with Confederate raiders under John Singleton Mosby. Cut off from his comrades, Corbett continued to fight even though the odds were against him. True to form, Corbett shouted, "Amen! Glory to God!" each time his bullets found their mark. He reportedly killed seven enemies before he ran out of ammunition. Only then did he surrender.

Sent to Andersonville, Corbett later claimed, "There God was good to me, sparing my life." He also recalled "a score of souls were converted, right on the spot where I lay for three months without any shelter." Yet he was reduced to a near-skeleton before he was lucky enough to be released from the prison, and had to spend several weeks in a Maryland hospital before rejoining the Army as a sergeant in Company L, 16th New York Cavalry.

**From God's Avenger to Kansas Farmer**  
 April 14, 1865, found Boston Corbett in Washington, D.C., praying that God would allow him to be an instrument of his wrath and avenge the president's assassination. As we've seen, his prayer was answered. But after the novelty of his newfound fame began to wear off, the cavalry sergeant sought an early release from the Army. Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton refused.

## ‘Quick to anger and increasingly paranoid, Corbett slept with a loaded

Corbett invested a lot of time trying to get his share of the reward that the government had offered for bringing Lincoln's killer to justice. It was a slow process, complicated by the fact that others—particularly detective Luther Baker—sought to discredit the little sergeant, claiming that the 16th's troopers had specific orders not to shoot, since the plan was to take Booth alive. Yet Baker and Conger would later testify under oath that there had been no specific orders to shoot or not shoot. Eventually the cavalryman did receive a share of the reward money, altogether \$1,653.84.

He started making hats again after mustering out, but his mental problems apparently worsened. Quick to anger and increasingly paranoid, he now slept with a loaded pistol under his pillow. It was said he feared assassination, and also kept a wary eye out for Booth's ghost.

Corbett became a full-time minister for the Camden, N.J., Siloam Methodist Episcopal Mission in 1869. But he still couldn't seem to find any peace, so in the spring of 1878 he pulled up stakes and moved to Concordia, the county seat of Cloud County, Kan., rolling into town on a buckboard pulled by a black horse named "Billy." Albert T. Reed, a resident who remembered Corbett's arrival, recalled seeing "a small, insignificant looking man, with a thin, scraggly beard, and he wore an old army cap...." Reed recalled that Corbett, who had hair that "hung to his shoulders," was armed with two pistols.

The ex-hatter filed a claim on 80 acres about seven miles south of town, where he quickly established a reputation as a recluse—though he didn't try to conceal his identity. When word spread that he was famous, locals invited him to give a lecture on the Booth affair and his experiences at Andersonville. To everyone's surprise he accepted. But when Corbett showed up, he refused to say a word about Booth or Andersonville, instead haranguing the crowd at length about the need to repent.

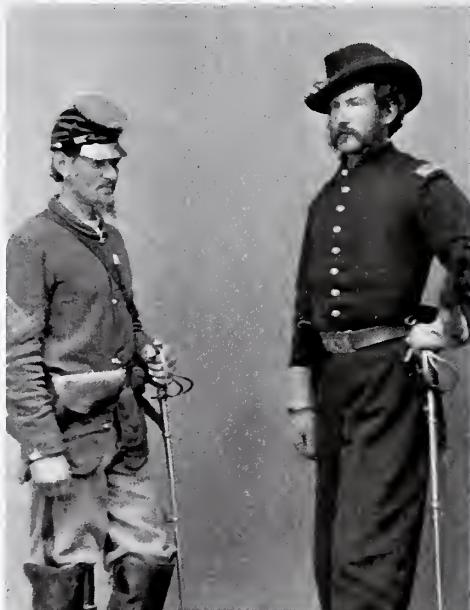
For the most part, Corbett remained aloof from his new neighbors. At first he hired four men to work his land. They planted some corn, but he himself never appeared in the fields until the evening. Eventually he gave up farming by proxy and took to raising chickens and a few head

of livestock. The source of Corbett's funds soon became a topic of speculation. He paid for everything in cash, yet he never worked, spending most of his time either wandering on the plains or holed up inside his sparsely furnished dugout, answering his mail.

He had slightly more contact with one neighbor, a Mrs. Randall who sold him milk and butter, than with anyone else. To her he confided that he wanted to be buried on his own property, and he showed her and another woman a grave he had already dug near his dugout. He also showed them a blanket, saying that he wanted to be wrapped in it when his time came. Corbett was only in his late 40s at the time and in seemingly good health, but phantom assassins clearly lurked in his troubled mind.

Then a violent incident strained relations between Corbett and his neighbors. What would be known as the "baseball incident" took place on a Sunday morning, when some local boys were playing baseball. Reading scripture while driving past in his buckboard, Corbett became incensed that his neighbors were indulging in what he saw as a "profane" game on the Sabbath. Stopping his horse, he took a pistol from his belt and shouted, "It's wicked to play baseball on the Lord's Day!" brandishing his weapon. The frightened youngsters and bystanders quickly scattered.

The next day a warrant was sworn out for Corbett, who was summoned to appear in the office of Concordia's Justice of the Peace to stand trial. Practically the whole town had turned out to see the "entertainment." Corbett showed up fully armed, though at first he seemed placid enough. But as a series of witnesses took the stand to testify about his violent outburst, the little hatter grew more grim. When the adults who had been watching the baseball game related how Corbett had pointed his pistol at them, threatening to shoot, the former hatter erupted in a torrent of vehement denials, pointing his pistol at the witnesses. "That's a lie, lie, lie!" he shrilled. "I'll shoot any man who says such things against me!" Ironically the fiery little man had proved the prosecution's case against him—though nobody was prepared to sit around pondering the fine points of the law at that juncture. "I can tell you there was



Corbett (left) with the 16th N.Y. Cavalry Detachment's commanding officer, 1st Lt. Edward Doherty.

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# pistol under his pillow and kept a wary eye out for Booth's ghost'

scattering," a witness remembered, adding that "they trampled each other getting to the doors and windows." Somehow the officials managed to calm Corbett, who left the office unmolested. All thought of further legal action against the former hatter was shelved. The Kansans realized he was not exactly normal, and was perhaps even insane—but still felt great sympathy for him.

## Madman Goes Missing for Good

After the baseball incident, a local politician managed to get Corbett a job as a doorkeeper in the Kansas State Legislature at Topeka. It was a well-meaning gesture that ignored Corbett's history of irrational outbursts. For a month all went well; Corbett stuck to his duties and became something of a tourist attraction, since folks were still curious to see the man who had killed John Wilkes Booth. But the hatter once again went off the rails on February 15, 1887.

There are several versions of what happened to set him off this time. According to one account, he overheard blasphemous remarks being made during a legislative session's opening prayer. Or perhaps there was no real reason, and the personal demons he had battled for so long finally got the better of him. In any case, Corbett started running around the capitol corridors raving, waving a revolver as the legislators ran for cover. After officials subdued and examined him, he was sent to the Kansas State Insane Asylum.

Corbett's stay there seems to have exacerbated his problems. He had hallucinations that assassins were stalking the hallways or lying in wait for him. A month into his incarceration he stole a knife and assaulted an attendant,

apparently in the course of an escape attempt.

On May 26, 1888, while Corbett and others were outside exercising, the wily former cavalryman spotted a horse tethered nearby and tried again. When their attendant was momentarily distracted, Corbett galloped away. Fliers were circulated advertising his escape and warning that he was a dangerous man. A few days later a livery stable owner reported that a man had dropped off a horse, asking that the asylum be notified of its whereabouts. It was vintage Corbett—he was concerned that his horse "borrowing" might be construed as theft.

After that he sought refuge in Neodesha, Kan., at the home of Irwin DeFord, the son of Captain Harvey DeFord, who had spent time as a POW with him. The younger DeFord hid Corbett in a barn for a few days, and when the fugitive decided to move on he was given a horse, a blanket and some money—and told never to come back. Corbett readily agreed, telling DeFord that he was "heading to Mexico." Upon leaving, he autographed DeFord's wife's memory book on June 1, 1888. It would be the last documented appearance of Boston Corbett.

The strange little man who had leapt to fame in 1865 now returned to obscurity. All sorts of stories followed in his wake, including sightings all over the country. Some believe that Corbett settled in the forests of Hinckley, Minn., and died in the great Hinckley fire of 1894. The truth will likely never be known. 

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*Eric Niderost won the 2005 Army Historical Foundation Distinguished Writing Award. For more on Lincoln's assassination and Ford's Theatre, turn to "Resources" on P. 71.*



## Blame Mercury for Mad Hatters?

THE HATTER'S TRADE became associated with mental illness in the 19th century, when mercury was widely used to cure the animal pelts used to fashion hats—including beaver pelts, which were felted and made into top hats. Prolonged exposure to mercury fumes in poorly ventilated workshops and factories sometimes resulted in neurological damage that manifested itself in a variety of symptoms—physical and mental. These included a stumbling gait and tremors that became known as "hatter's shakes." Some workers

were also prone to mood swings, irritability and, in severe cases, hallucinations. We'll never know for sure whether mercury poisoning caused or contributed to Boston Corbett's increasingly aberrant behavior, but the former hatter's idiosyncrasies clearly mirror many symptoms associated with mercury poisoning.

One of the earliest print references linking madness to hat-making dates from 1829, when it was quoted in a humorous sketch

published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. Today of course we automatically think of the Mad Hatter in Lewis Carroll's 1865 book *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Some claim that Carroll, a math professor at Oxford University, actually based his Hatter on an eccentric Oxford carpenter, Theophilus Carter, who generally wore a top hat. But Carroll had no doubt met some eccentric hat-makers as well: He grew up in the town of Stockport, in Cheshire, where hating was the predominant industry.

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